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Member of the
Audit Bureau of
Circulations
12,708
January
December 2018



Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR)

www.futureplc.com

Chief executive **Jon Steinberg**
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Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

“CIVILIZATION TYPIFIES EVERYTHING THAT IS GREAT ABOUT PC GAMING”

**ROBERT JONES****Twitter**
@rnicolasj**This month**

Gorged upon the eyes and spleens of console gamers who strayed too close to PC Gamer Towers. There's a reason he still looks so youthful and hunky, you know.

When I think of PC gaming's key pillar series that both help define the platform and always deliver exceptional quality, there are few more notable than *Sid Meier's Civilization*, which since 1991 has typified everything that is great about this hobby that we all love.

Which is why it brings me great pleasure to bring you this *Civilization VII* issue of PC

Gamer. After playing the new 4X strategy game extensively and interviewing many of its lead developers, right here we deliver everything you need to know in our world-exclusive cover feature, starting on page 38. Enjoy the issue!

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team

**WES FENLON****Twitter**
@wesleyfenlon**This month**

Used a factory cart to joyride around PC Gamer Towers delivering special 'Fenlon Hugs'. Don't ask...

**IAN EVENDEN****Twitter**
@ieunden**This month**

Sat butt naked in a hot tub outside a Finnish cottage while drinking moonshine. Anything for this job.

**FRASER BROWN****Twitter**
@FraserIBrown**This month**

Wandered around the toxic streets of a fallen, dystopian city. Realised it was just London.

**KARA PHILLIPS****Twitter**
@KaraPhillipsA**This month**

Gunned down "pesky varmints" with her six shooter. Oh, and in *Red Dead Redemption* she...

PC Gamer (ISSN 1351-3540, USPS 24170), February issue 405, is published monthly with an extra issue in April by Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, UK. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container INC 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA. Periodicals Postage Paid at Brooklyn, NY 11256. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to PC Gamer, Air Business Ltd, c/o World Container INC 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.

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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



Instead of *Episode 3*, we got *Alyx*, which was still pretty great.

FOLLOWING FREEMAN

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE 3 would have been 'copping out' says Gabe

Rumours about *Half-Life 2: Episode 3* have circulated for years, but a new documentary released for *Half-Life 2*'s 20th Anniversary has possibly revealed more than we've ever seen before, showing glimpses of the game and getting a few of its developers to explain why it was never finished.

The gist is that Valve didn't know how to push the game design forward enough to make it feel worthwhile. A new ice gun was apparently not up to the studio's standards of innovation, nor were



the blob enemies that used *Portal* tech. In the doc, *Half-Life 2* level designer David Riller says that they were experiencing "element fatigue" and needed to "go bigger or do something else".

"I think we had really explored a lot of what made sense in the *Half-Life* universe and setting," Riller

**A NEW ICE GUN
WAS APPARENTLY
NOT UP TO THE
STUDIO'S STANDARDS**

says. Writer Marc Laidlaw echoes that feeling, noting that even Arkane was struggling to do new things in its cancelled *Ravenholm* spin-off.

When *Left 4 Dead* needed help shipping, the *Episode 3* team paused work on the next *Half-Life* campaign to pitch in, and like a hobby woodworking project that gets put down for just a moment and winds up collecting dust for decades, that was its ultimate demise.

Engineer David Speyrer says that it was "tragic and almost comical" that, after *Left 4 Dead* was out the door, they felt like they'd missed their opportunity to finish *Episode 3* and needed to make a new engine if they

IT HAPPENED AGAIN

FFXIV CHEATERS



Final Fantasy XIV gave players an Ultimate raid, prompting a race for a world first. The victors stepped on a rake, posting a screenshot with a single red pixel which proved they'd been cheating with addons. It's the third time in a row such tricksters have been caught red-handed. ■ **HR**

OUT THE WINDOW

IT'S A TRAP!



24H2 isn't the name of a droid, it's the latest Windows update, and a few recent Ubisoft games, like *Star Wars Outlaws*, have stopped working properly as a result. The solution was an update block followed by a hotfix, which is about as efficient as a quick response can ever be. ■ **JB**

PINKY PROMISE

MINECRAFT MOVIE



We've not seen much of The Minecraft Movie so far (apart from a couple of trailers), but what has been shown has not proven popular with fans. Despite all the abuse being hurled at the film adaptation, director Jared Hess tried to reassure fans that the test screenings were received well. ■ **EG**



ABOVE: Apparently 'Half-Life, but cold' didn't cut it for Gabe.

were going to continue the series. "That just seems in hindsight so wrong," Speyrer said. "We could've definitely gone back and spent two years to make *Episode 3*."

STUMPED

But not everyone agrees. When founder Gabe Newell addressed the subject, he said that completing *Episode 3* just to finish the story would've been cheating. "You can't get lazy and say, 'Oh, we're moving the story forward,'" said Newell. "That's copping out of your obligation to gamers. Yes, of course they love the story. They love many, many aspects of it. But saying that your reason to do it is because people want to know what happens next, you know – we could've shipped it, it wouldn't have been that hard. The failure, my personal failure was being stumped. I couldn't figure out why doing *Episode 3* was pushing anything forward."

The documentary concludes with the upside: after not finishing *Episode 3*, Valve's done a lot of other stuff, like release *Dota 2* and the Steam Deck. But for the *Half-Life* fans unsatisfied by that takeaway, there is an extremely meagre tease (classic Valve) about the future at the end: just Newell saying that, sure, yeah, there are opportunities to do more *Half-Life* stuff. ■

Tyler Wilde

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Good news

GOG says games in its preservation program will keep getting fixes even if they're delisted.

Greater than Geralt?

CDPR says *The Witcher 4* 'will not be smaller, and it will not be worse' than its previous games.

Speedy fix

An update to *Half-Life 2* stiffed speedrunners, so Valve fixed the fix and said 'enjoy'.

Bad news

The announcement about GOG's program only happened because Blizzard is delisting OG *Warcraft*.

Everyone has a price

Fresh from a swathe of layoffs, Microsoft is already thinking about more studio acquisitions.

Skin problems

Black Ops 6 players hate the new skins so much that some are asking to pay for them to be removed.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

People have postulated that *The Spy* is nothing more than a hyper-advanced AI sent back in time from the distant future in order to relate, with perfect accuracy, the gaming scoops of tomorrow. It's true, of course, that *The Spy* is never wrong, like how a Gregg's Festive Bake is never not tasty, but an AI? No chance. What separates *The Spy* from an AI is *The Spy*'s tradecraft, which is second to none.

Take *The Spy*'s recent excursion to Seoul, South Korea as a good example of this. That feel-good meeting earlier this year between sci-fi action adventure *Nier: Automata*'s director, Yoko Taro, and sci-fi action adventure *Stellar Blade*'s director, Hyung-Tae Kim was tighter to penetrate than Fort Knox. But *The Spy* was in the room as, little did Taro know, when the game developer lost his famous Emil mask back in 2023 while out drinking, it was in fact swiped by *The Spy* and then, once bugged, returned to Taro via a randomly believable backchannel. As such, *The Spy* heard every word of that meeting, including how Taro liked the idea of a collaboration between the two brands. It's also when *The Spy* first got wind that Kim was considering a PC port of *Stellar Blade* due to its notable success on PlayStation 5.

Fast forward to the future, which is now the past, and *Stellar Blade* has now been confirmed as coming to PC, with details coming out of a recent financial report stating that: "To continue the excitement of the *Stellar Blade* IP, we are preparing for its release on PC in the near future, and we expect better results on PC than on consoles". Better results on PC than consoles? That's something that not just *The Spy* can predict with 100 percent accuracy, but any PC gamer who has been following the current trend of PC gaming now being a huge priority area for Eastern software houses.

HERE TODAY, AI TOMORROW

Stellar Blade is an action RPG that tells the story of a post-apocalyptic world in which humanity has been forced to abandon the Earth after losing a war against monstrous creatures known as Naytibas. In order to

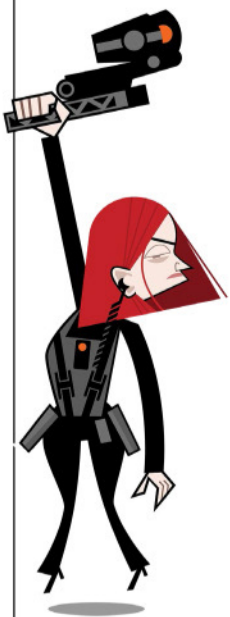


reclaim the Earth, special military squads of warriors, of which the gamer plays one called Eve, are dispatched back to the planet from a space base controlled by the AI Mother Sphere to fight the Naytibas and retake the globe. Cue plenty of spectacular locations, narrative twists and adrenaline-inducing fights, with *Stellar Blade*'s boss battles in particular being a stand-out highlight.

And, *The Spy* can confirm, that *Stellar Blade* maker's claim that there will be "better results on PC" is well founded. Documents seen by *The Spy* point to unlocked framerate at a 4K resolution, support for ultrawide monitors and Nvidia DLSS, as well as access to all currently released DLC costumes, which includes, funnily enough, some crossover *Nier: Automata* outfits for Eve. Quelle surprise!

Whether the PC version of *Stellar Blade* will see enhanced support for ray-traced lighting effects, though, remains unknown. But, maybe *The Spy* knows that it will come with a path-tracing mode, and is being vague to fly under the radar of the omniscient all-powerful AI of the future which controls the world. *Spy* out. ■

The Spy



THE SPY

The Spy taught Queeg everything it knows about playing chess.

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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES

Pieces from multiple paintings often end up stitched together to create *Reprobate's* environments.

Fruits and/or vegetables!

PAINT-FULLY FUNNY

Harnessing the timeless art of Hieronymus **BOSCH**, **BRUEGEL** and the poop joke

Sometimes the art-making process is a sacred thing. Other times it's fart trumpets and poop jokes. Nobody knew this better than Renaissance artists, who are best known for the stunning paintings of 14th to 16th century Italy like *The Birth of Venus*. Then there's Hieronymus Bosch, the 15th century Dutch painter whose most famous work is a triptych of Eden, Earth, and Hell called *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. His overwhelmingly detailed panoramas tell a hundred stories in one. While their overall subject matter is serious, those little stories create a collage of Earthly life that's both comedic and surreal.

It makes sense then that Bosch's painting *Death of the Reprobate* is the inspiration for (and namesake of) Joe Richardson's follow-up to 2020's *The Procession to Calvary*. To play the point-and-click adventure made out of the artscapes of the Renaissance, you navigate through his composite paintings, doing seven good deeds so your dying father will pass the crown to you.

Bosch was the starting point for the game for another good reason: he was one of the only Renaissance artists Richardson knew. "When I decided to work in this style [Bosch and Bruegel] were pretty much all I knew of Renaissance art. Even after delving

into the depths of the museum archives and casting my net a little wider with each instalment, he remains one of my favourites," Richardson says.

Richardson's humour gets its bodily fluids and physical comedy from his pre-modern inspirations, which were vividly aware that all the five senses can be funny. As you try to complete those seven good deeds, you can interact with each character in three ways: looking, talking and touching. You can poke two people having sex in a barn, flirt inappropriately with a runaway bride, and flee from the overwhelming sound of a room crowded with screaming children. The sights, sounds and smells of the city you're running around mix with anachronistic-on-purpose modern humour, like when a loom operator jokes about creative numbness or a pagan god responds to religious fervour with, "Bro, chill". It's a surreal blend.

Richardson's history with art began with Flash animation collages of cut-up photographs before he studied 3D modelling. In his first game, *The Preposterous Awesomeness of Everything*, he used photo montage to create human models with exaggerated facial features and bright backgrounds that often clash with the characters and UI. Richardson admits the game was grotesque on purpose, "I was still an art student at the time, forgive me," but it's what gave him the idea to make a more visually cohesive world from collage.



Holy Triptych

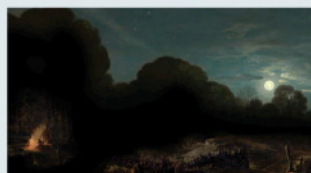
Hieronymus Bosch, aka Jeroen van Aken, was known for his images of Hell and otherworldly monsters. In *Death of the Reprobate*, angels and demons struggle over a human soul. He was a member of the early Netherlandish school, whose oil paintings are full of detailed iconography and emphasise shadows and depth. Netherlandish paintings are extremely detailed – perfect for a point-and-click game!



FAR LEFT: Busted! There will be no stealing sticks on my watch.

LEFT: The modern language makes for an absurdist contrast with 500-year-old art.

I SPY Renaissance details you can find in *Death of the Reprobate*



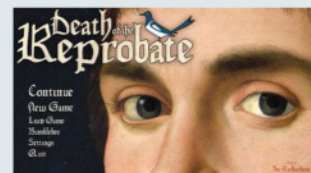
A FULL MOON
A full moon from Albert Elsheimer's *The Flight into Egypt*, 1609. Hope there's no werewolves about!



FISHERMAN
From Quirijn Van Brekelenkam's 1663 *Interior with Fisherman and Man beside a Bobbin and Spool*. Well titled.



OPHELIA
Ophelia looking worse for wear, from John Everett Millais' famous *Ophelia*, 1851-2.



PORTRAIT OF A MAN
Even the title screen gets a painting, from *Portrait of a Man* by Antonello da Messina, 1475.

I was curious what drew Richardson to Renaissance art in particular, and it's the visual composition that he says made it appealing. Scenes in the game can have elements from between one and 100 different paintings, all found through gallery archives and Wikipedia. Musicians play harps and cellos in the foreground while extras on rooftops in the background hit each other on the head with brooms, and interactive characters yell, sleep, get high and watch birds in between the two. Spoken lines become ink on parchment, complete with typos and emoticons. The whole thing ends up looking like a manuscript broken down into pieces.

CREATIVE DECISION

Richardson has collected 4,022 paintings in total across his three games, and estimates that only a third of them appear. Although compositing them into the same scene requires some manipulation, his goal is to alter each original image as little as he can. "Basically every creative decision I make is led by the artworks: I make all the background art first, before any writing or puzzle design. I'm always moulding the dialogue and the puzzles to fit around the art, not the other way around," he says.

Although this makes it sound like the puzzles are an afterthought, they fit in with the surrounding collage world. In an early puzzle where you can swap out the background, foreground and subject of a painting in an art gallery. When you return to an earlier screen, you find that real life has imitated the changes. It's funny to give a guy a cabbage head for no reason, but it was also a

moment where I realised the cosmetic and play elements of *Death of the Reprobate* were entwined.

You might expect the person who developed these puzzles to have a soft spot for them, but Richardson feels differently. "I hate puzzles!" he says. "For me they're just there to give you an excuse to be in the world. They give the player a purpose and encourage them to explore, but I don't find them inherently fun. [And] making a fun interaction from a pre-defined set of objects [like the paintings] is sometimes a bit of a nightmare."

Writing the script provoked the opposite feeling. "There is so much already in these artworks, my idiotic misinterpretation makes them immediately funny to me," Richardson says. Juxtaposing the elements of different paintings, many of whose themes contradict each other, allowed him to craft jokes without writing a line of dialogue. And there's moments

I WAS CURIOUS WHAT DREW RICHARDSON TO RENAISSANCE ART IN PARTICULAR

where just describing what's on screen – like "Fully Clothed Lute-Bearing Adult," "Affable Sky Wench," or "God Almighty" – is funny in and of itself.

Richardson's games are dioramas that talk back, chunks of the past that threaten sensory overload. While I definitely can't call *Death of the Reprobate* an educational game, it's possible to learn about many, many paintings and artists from the in-game gallery, which is built from all the works collected during the development process. "Making games has always been a struggle for me, and selling games, even more so. So if my games are remembered at all, I will be happy as Larry," he says. ■

Emily Price



Made in Japan

PC GAMING FROM THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN



ABOVE: Playing *Nightmare Operator* at the most recent Tokyo Game Show.

FAR LEFT: The game is presented in a retro '90s raw polygon graphics style.

JAPANESE SPIRIT

PC Gamer chats to DDDistortion, the developer of **NIGHTMARE OPERATOR**

The biggest indie revelation at Tokyo Game Show was *Nightmare Operator*, the retro-styled action-horror game from DDDistortion. This is a game that frequently had huge queues of gamers waiting patiently to play it on the show floor, with the game's mid-'90s raw 3D polygon graphics style and spooky vibes capturing the attention of many.

Nightmare Operator takes place in a futuristic post-apocalyptic part of Tokyo called Shin Chiba, where we, the game's titular operators, have a mission to eliminate various Japanese yokai, supernatural spectres and demons that plague the city and like to inhabit the dead bodies of humans. The game, in terms of play mechanics, feels like a mix of *Resident Evil 4*, *Dead Space* and *Silent Hill*, where our mission is to clear stages full of yokai.

What's really interesting about *Nightmare Operator*, though, is that its developer DDDistortion is not only based in Japan (specifically in Tokyo's Shibuya district), but is a combination of both Japanese and Western developers. These include Nolan Joseph (game designer, programmer and president), Kathy Diaz (art director), and Brain Van (3D artist). And then there are the Japanese members of the dev team that operate under the nickname 'Kurokku' (lead animator), and under the nickname 'No in H' (monster designer).

It's a unique indie studio producing a really cool-looking game, so to get the inside scoop PC Gamer decided to sit down with the game's director, Nolan Joseph, to learn more.

Hi Nolan. Can you briefly introduce yourself to our readers?

Hi, I am Nolan Joseph, head of the dev team, as well as president, programmer and game designer of DDDistortion Studio.

Where are you from, first of all?

From the United States to be exact.

Most of our readers would no doubt ask, "How did you end up right here in Japan, mate?"

Ha ha, well it is a long story. I have always been a gamer starting from when I was at school in the '90s, but I really never imagined one day I would end up creating the type of games I loved in my childhood as an independent studio in Japan. Because back then I had a no clear view of what I really wanted to do, but I did think that one day I could work in Japan or Italy.



DR MARCO ZANGIROLAMI

Marco is an expert on the Japanese gaming industry, having reported on its PC, console and arcade industry since 1996. Not many people know this, but he was also the original Ultraman in the 1966 Japanese TV series, and has since fought Ultraman's nemesis Zetton no less than 27 times. Fact.

Why was that?

Well, my parents' origins are from Italy, so I thought I could have gone there to find a job. The reason I thought Japan, too, was due to the admiration I had for the Japanese games I played as a kid, so I ended up right here.

SUPERNATURAL SPECTRES AND DEMONS PLAGUE THE CITY

I'm sure many readers would want to know how you got started working in Japan?

Well, I came here in 2013 and signed on to a Japanese school to get a student visa. Then I learned the language. Once I'd got the language, I looked out for a job and was hired by a Japanese company. I worked at the firm for years and had great time. But at the end of the last project, where my boss was satisfied with the work I had done and knew I was willing to produce a videogame, I talked with him and he decided to support this new project.

When did you decided to make *Nightmare Operator* with a retro raw polygon graphics style?

Immediately. I am an hardcore fan of Capcom's '90s survival games, so my intention was to do something that reminded me of that kind of experience, but not only that. I also wanted to insert a hide-and-seek element, which is typical of the *Metal Gear* series, as well as the combat elements of *Guilty Gear*.

***Nightmare Operator* has had great feedback from gamers so far, did that surprise you?**

I am really surprised, and that's why I am still here at TGS, because we were simply not expecting such strong feedback and support.

In terms of development, you declared the game will need to have eight missions to be able to give the audience ten hours of gameplay. So how far through are you, and when can we expect a release?

Let's say that *Nightmare Operator*, according to my intentions, is still not yet at 20 percent completion, as we are still improving not just the level design but the overall game experience. The feedback we've received here has been so strong that it is driving on the team to improve not just what we haven't yet created, but what we have already achieved so *Nightmare Operator* can excel in every way.

Nightmare Operator will release on Steam. For more information about the game you can visit the developer's website: dddistortion-games.com

INDIE DARLING

Tokyo Game Show success

Nightmare Operator was not just my pick of indie games at TGS but a big success with Japanese attendees, too, with sizeable waits to go hands-on.



1 month



ASSETTO CORSA EVO

RELEASE January 16, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** KUNOS Simulazioni

A driving simulator geared towards hyper realism, *EVO* promises plenty of top marques and racing thrills, with different classes spanning across the history of motoring.



MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2

RELEASE January 30, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Insomniac Games

The visually impressive action-adventure game starring the famous web-throwing wonder finally hits PC. Here's hoping we get the quality port this game deserves.



SNIPER ELITE: RESISTANCE

RELEASE January 30, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Rebellion

The violent sniper simulator returns, promising new stealth and tactical third-person combat mechanics, as well as a fresh campaign set within the heart of WWII-era France.

2 months



SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION VII

RELEASE February 11, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Firaxis Games

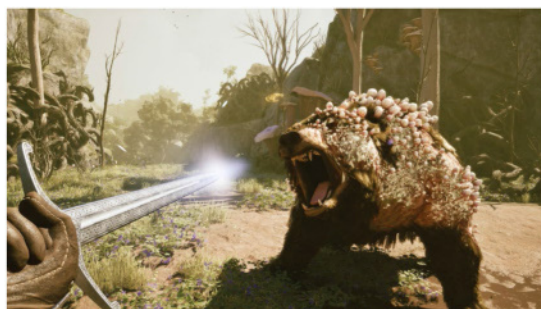
The latest instalment in the long-running 4X strategy series, *Civ VII* lets you create kingdoms and rule as many legendary leaders throughout history.



KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE II

RELEASE February 11, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Warhorse Studios

Henry and Hans return for more medieval adventures. A massive open world that's twice the size of the original game as well as expanded combat system are on offer.



AVOWED

RELEASE February 18, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Obsidian

The anticipated first-person fantasy RPG that is definitely not like *Skyrim*. A small delay means *Skyrim* fans can now look forward to playing it in February, 2025.

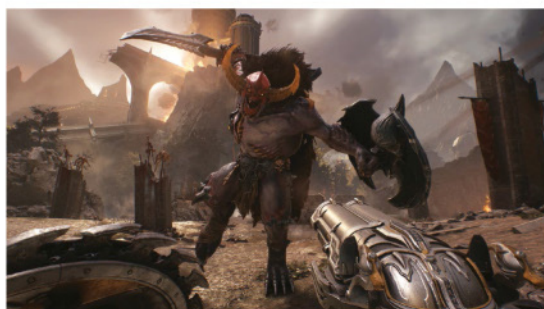
3 months



CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Sandfall Interactive

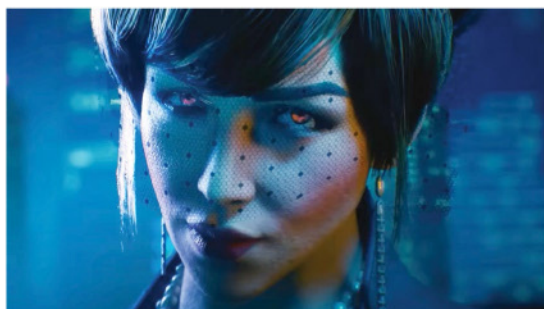
Lead the members of Expedition 33 on their quest to destroy the Paintress so that she can never paint death again. Dark fantasy, turn-based RPG.



DOOM: THE DARK AGES

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** id Software

Doom goes historical, with the player stepping into the shoes of a living super weapon who fights in a hyper-violent medieval war against hell. Heavy metal guaranteed.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** The Chinese Room

Despite development troubles and multiple delays to its release date, we remain hopeful that this first-person World of Darkness RPG has proper fangs.

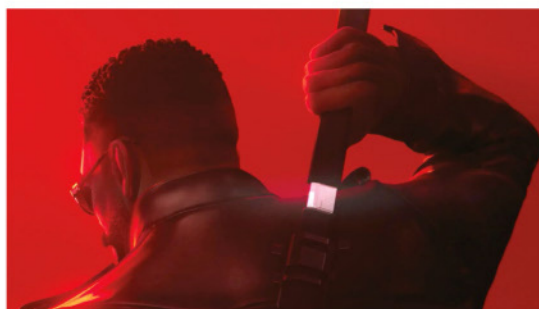
4 months+



FALLING FRONTIER

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Stutter Fox Studios

Conquer a vast, procedurally generated star system in this sci-fi RTS where gathering intel and ensuring efficient logistics are key factors to victory.



BLADE

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Arkane Lyon

From the talented devs who brought PC gamers the *Dishonored* series, Marvel's daywalker is set for a mature, singleplayer, third-person adventure game.



GTA VI

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Rockstar Studios

Everything we're hearing right now points to the next *Grand Theft Auto* launching in 2025. But whether or not that includes PC is unknown. Come on Rockstar, sort it out!

MOD

HEAVY LIFTING

If you've been enjoying *STALKER 2: Heart of Chernobyl* but found the rather restrictive carry weight system frustrating, then NickMillion's *Adjustable Carry Weight* mod is just the ticket. With the mod installed, you can choose your own carry weight, from a bit more than usual to a whole lot more. Grab it here: tinyurl.com/6yd4jvy6



PREVIEW

Sniper Elite Resistance

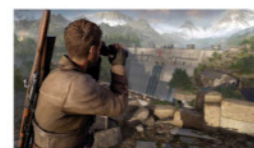


ABOVE: Close-quarters combat is an option, but it is very high-stakes.

RIGHT: "Freeze! Now hand over your copy of PC Gamer magazine."



Sniper Elite Resistance



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
January 30, 2025

DEVELOPER
Rebellion

PUBLISHER
Rebellion

LINK
rebellion.com

SNIPER ELITE RESISTANCE

Sniper rounds and Nazi testicles, together again

A naïve part of me expected *Sniper Elite Resistance* to deviate from the *Sniper Elite* formula, if only a touch. I thought maybe we'd be shooting something other than Nazis, perhaps during a point in history that's not World War II. No: *Sniper Elite Resistance* is still about shooting Nazis during WWII. Not only that, but like *Sniper Elite 5*, *Sniper Elite Resistance* is set in France.

I guess it has to be Nazis every time. No other baddies are as unambiguously villainous in the history of sniper rifles, except for zombies, and Rebellion has a whole other series for that (the *Zombie Army* series, where the zombies are, I shit you not, Nazis too). When the violence is as gratuitous and forensic as it is in the *Sniper Elite* series, it pretty much has to be Nazis.

So *Resistance* is basically *Sniper Elite 5.5*, then. The major distinguishing factor is that this one stars Harry, a British guy, instead of the usual Karl, an American guy. Anyone who played *Sniper Elite 3* to *5* in co-op will have met Harry as player two. He's just as good a marksman as Karl, and harbours a similarly healthy contempt for Nazis – don't we all! – so aside from his accent and sometimes amusing asides ("I'm losing a lot of motion lotion here!") he's not different to play at all. He's less amusingly archetypal than Karl, because Karl is basically id Software's BJ Blazkowicz. Harry will probably take some getting used to, but I did appreciate how, as he

dashed along a promenade absorbing countless bullets, he promised he'd "be right as rain as soon as I stop this bleeding". Stiff upper lip and old that, right? Harry's British after all.

SONDERZUGE SABOTAGE

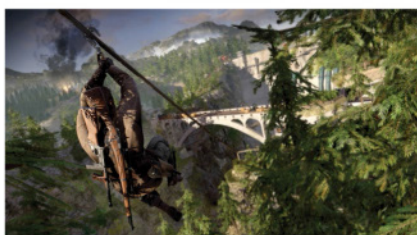
I played the third mission, which is set in the moonlit Fourviere district of Lyon. The resistance group to which Harry belongs has noticed a lot of Nazi presence around the train station and nearby luxury hotel. Word is going around that the Nazis have a superweapon at their disposal (plus ça change, then), which is alarming indeed. I have to go and figure out what they're up to and, if the opportunity arises, put a stop to anything that might hinder the resistance's interests.

I start on a hilltop overlooking the Saone River and a heavily blockaded urban district. The train station and mansion are on the other side of this river, so I need to somehow get across the nearby bridge which is, in Harry's astute words, "crawling with Nazis". Like previous *Sniper Elite* entries, I have a sizeable open 'zone' to explore, sprinkled with lots of stealth options (long grass, chest-high cover) and tactical opportunities (white-noise emitting generators, vehicles to sabotage). There are pokey interiors to explore, which provide access to balconies and rooftops that provide a better view over the Nazi-ridden expanse, though each time I cross a road I need to ensure there's not a Nazi truck or Nazi motorbike-with-sidecar approaching. So far, so *Sniper Elite*.

But no matter what, I have to cross that bridge. It takes three deaths trying to cross it for me to remember that I'm playing a game about sniping. Those who enjoy this series, like me, know that they're big stealth sandboxes, more akin to *Metal Gear Solid 5* or *Hitman* than *Call of Duty* or even *Sniper: Ghost Warrior*. Still, it pays to remember that sniping is core to the series' identity, because it wasn't until I remembered this that I had success, chiefly via the disposal of enemy snipers – Nazi snipers – behind spotlights in the distance.

While the stealth in *Sniper Elite* games is less creative than in *Hitman* or *Metal*

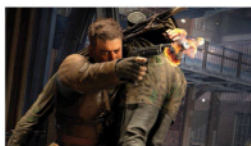
PLAYED
IT



Nazis are actually evil skeleton monsters. Fact.

I PLAYED THE THIRD MISSION, WHICH IS SET IN THE MOONLIT FOURVIERE DISTRICT OF LYON

Sniper Elite Resistance



☞ **Gear** – you can't dress up as a Nazi, for example, nor send a Nazi skybound with a helium balloon – it's a far sight more high-stakes than in *Assassin's Creed* or *Far Cry*. The AI is really good at flanking me when I make my presence lightly felt, and when I'm out in the open with guns blaring it's very rare for me to make it out alive. Escaping detection is usually a bit harder than just running around a corner and taking cover for 30 seconds. A lot of thought has gone into making the hide-and-seek fantasy authentic: walking into a group of birds and thus dispersing them may draw the attention of a nearby Nazi, for example.

But the sniping, yes. When you shoot the Nazis in the skull you still get super-slow motion X-ray footage of the Nazis brains being penetrated by bullets and then exploding. It's fun doing this, and not just because the baddie is a Nazi (though that's part of it, I swear). When I get a slow-motion kill shot I get to take a breath and relax. It's a brief respite from the overwhelming pressure of not getting caught, because like all good stealth games, *Sniper Elite* punishes me mercilessly for not being careful and thinking things through. These damned Nazis are sensitive to overhead footsteps and too-brisk movement through scrub, so when I play I'm always holding my breath to make sure I'm not making any unnecessary noise. X-ray vision of Nazis getting their brains splattered across the pavement is a nice break from all that. It also reveals the Nazis for what they are: evil skeleton monsters dressed up in skin.

I do end up making it to the mansion, after accidentally killing a high value target – Claude La Ronde – during an unrelated skirmish. It's a nice change in mood: this is a big lavish tinderbox of chaotic opportunities, albeit one strewn with swastikas. Anyone who played *Sniper Elite 5* – especially its superb Spy Academy level – knows how good Rebellion is at creating real-feeling spaces that nevertheless teem with clever gameplay opportunities. But because I've run out of time – from dying so often, due to forgetting to snipe – I just throw grenades everywhere. It's a lot of fun to do this, and of course I die, but I don't regret doing it. I

may have died, but Nazis did too, and they did so spectacularly, with limbs and helmets sent flying with wild abandon.

Is *Sniper Elite Resistance* good? So far, yes. I can't help but resort to a banality here: if you liked *Sniper Elite 5*, which was good, you will definitely like *Sniper Elite Resistance*. It's pretty much the same. The protagonist is British now, but this is another great stealth game about shooting Nazis. However, if you've previously not clicked with the pace of this series, nor its ability to punish you brutally for small mistakes, then from what I've seen there's not much to indicate you'll suddenly love this instalment.

HAPPY AS HARRY

The thing about the *Sniper Elite* games is that they're not cerebral games, but they're not stupid either. While the series' tone adopts the over-egged melodrama of '80s straight-to-video, that's not at the expense of mechanical complexity. I can lose hours messing around in the *Sniper Elite* games, prodding at different ways to pull off goals. These games, certainly the last couple in the series, are more complex than a straightforward FPS under the surface. I guess in that way, they're like those pulpy war novels full of bizarrely detailed military detail: their trashiness belies their complexity. They're immersive sims for people who don't like the weird bullshit in modern immersive sims, like blink abilities and rat spells. Bugger that fairytale frivolity! Give me boots-on-ground Nazi-slaying, mysterious superweapons and futile skirmishes from behind chest-high cover. In that regard, *Sniper Elite Resistance* hits hard and pushes all the right buttons.

But that also probably explains why the series' critical reception hasn't matched its audience reach. Presentation-wise, the *Sniper Elite* are macho shooting games about big dudes – whether American or British – mowing down indescribable evil, and ideally doing so by shooting them in the balls. Take that, Hitler! There's nothing subtle about them. It's goodies versus baddies, and it's undeniable that they lack the stylishness and subtle intelligence of, say, MachineGames' take on the *Wolfenstein* series. But you know what? So far *Sniper Elite Resistance* is a lot more fun than any *Wolfenstein* game I've ever played, so if you've previously liked that series' love of turning Nazis into a bloody mess, then maybe this will be worth a, controlled breathing, shot.

Shaun Prescott



REVEALS THE NAZIS FOR WHAT THEY ARE: EVIL SKELETON MONSTERS DRESSED IN SKIN



ABOVE: The series' hyper bloody slow-mo X-ray kill shots are back with a bang.

LEFT: This time you snipe as Harry, a Brit. He likes cucumber sandwiches, naturally.



PREVIEW

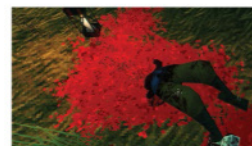
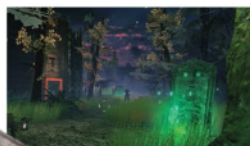
Coven



ABOVE: You scream out in agony as the flames lick higher.

RIGHT: This man's spleen is grist for your vengeance mill.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

Out now (Early Access)

DEVELOPER

Gator Shins

PUBLISHER

Hellforge Studios

LINK

shorturl.at/3louq

COVEN

Devour the flesh of your foes
in this bloody boomer shooter

Coven opens with you, a young woman living in the 1600s, being burned at the stake as a supposed witch. As the flames lick higher, your screams of agony ring out over the assembled crowd and through the trees of the surrounding forest. Blackness engulfs you, and your end arrives.

And then, for some reason beyond your ken, you're crawling your way out of your hastily dug grave, scrabbling against mud and stone, worms and detritus. You have been reanimated, resurrected, something, and now you're breaking through the ground and up into the dark night's damp air. You have been reborn, part dead, part not, and there's only one thing left to do, the thing that needs to be done, you must seek your vengeance. You must end those who sent you to your grave, as well as their masters.

Grabbing an axe, you drag your undead body from the graveyard and into the nearby village, realising that you now possess enhanced, unnatural speed. One of the men who burned you has his back to you, milling around a pumpkin patch. You bring the axe down upon his skull, cracking it open. The man drops to his knees, flailing around his cracked cranium with his hands, discombobulated due to his encroaching death, but before he falls, you eat his brain, then spleen, then legs. For you are now sustained by the flesh of your foes, and consuming them keeps the furnace of your revenge stoked.

Many more men die. One dies in a way nobody should ever have to see, being split from head to crotch in two, a fountain of blood spurting forth over your body, weapon and newfound shield. The villagers pose little threat to your demonic zeal, so soldiers come, inquisitors looking to stamp out malefactors. Crossbow bolts slam into your shield, throwing axes are sent flying at your head, but all to no avail – you grab one of their guns and riddle them with holes. Before gorging on their eyes.

BOOK OF THE DEAD

A strange cloud, evoking a giant green will-o'-the-wisp, appears out of the pervading gloom. It shoots off through the forest and, compelled by an unseen force, you follow it, snaking hither and thither until being finally brought before a shimmering portal. Stepping through, a book wreathed in grey, deformed skin, and with a single animated eye on its cover, hovers in midair, begging to be collected. You do so, and discover it is the Necronomicon, the book of the dead. This tome empowers you further, imbuing you with the power to cast a variety of deadly spells. After stepping through a vast series of graves that stand, like an army, before a monstrous black citadel, you step through another portal, and once more are brought back to the world in which you died.

Dripping with weapons, spells and powers, one of which being the terrifying ability to vomit acid upon your foes, you continue the carnage. Knights charge you, chainmail and heavy helmets donned, but while these men take longer to die, they still end up losing their limbs, they still end up bloody vessels from which you drink with wild abandon. Each spleen, each face, each stomach consumed restores your health on this merry dance of death. You cannot be stopped, will not be stopped.

Other places and, yes, even other times are calling you onward, driving you forward on your bloody, unholy journey. Whatever you may have been once is dead, and what remains is more fearsome than any of those zealots could ever have imagined. They should be scared and pray that their soul is clean, as your judgement is coming.

Robert Jones

**EACH SPLEEN, EACH FACE,
EACH STOMACH CONSUMED
RESTORES YOUR HEALTH**



The book of the dead is yours to command.

PREVIEW

Elden Ring: Nightreign



Elden Ring: Nightreign

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025DEVELOPER
FromSoftwarePUBLISHER
Bandai NamcoLINK
bandainamcoent.comELDEN RING:
NIGHTREIGNA new standalone spin-off
puts the focus on co-op action

FromSoftware producer Yasuhiro Kitao asks us to forgive him if he seems nervous. He doesn't, but I'd have sweated through my socks if I was in his shoes – he's about to let us play FromSoftware's next game and, after the phenomenon of *Elden Ring*, it's the last thing any of us expect. Because it looks – and I say this with zero shade – like a mod.

Modders delight in remixing the familiar FromSoftware RPGs into games that are easier (or harder), sillier (or scarier). The *Seamless Co-Op* mod for *Elden Ring* has been downloaded by more than 2.5 million PC gamers. Randomisers that shuffle *Souls* games' items and enemy locations are mainstays of speedrunning events. So who says FromSoftware can't get in on the fun by modding its own game? Crank the speed up to 150%, ditch fall damage, throw in a ton of random loot and some other roguelike variables, and you've pretty much got *Elden Ring: Nightreign*.

I'll admit I didn't take to it right away. But about four hours into an all-day playtest in a conference room in Tokyo, blinds drawn against the sun until it dropped below the nearby office towers, I started to feel it: that raw animal thrill of a great roguelike build. The chest-thumping glory of slicing a six-foot katana through the guts of Margit the Fell Omen, proccing a bleed that chunked off ten percent of his health bar, and then mashing my character's special ability to double all the damage I just dealt. Glorious.

PRESET 'HEROES' WITH UNIQUE
ATTRIBUTES REPLACE THE
CHARACTER CREATOR

This spin-off makes a perplexing first impression, treating *Elden Ring*'s weapons, enemies, and starting zone Limgrave as an all-you-can-reuse asset store for a new, condensed three-player roguelike. The vibes get stranger when you see a battle royale-style wall of deadly rain encircle the map and characters dashing around on foot like they're set to permanent fast-forward, now nimbly mantling cliffs and walls. It seems almost sacrilegious to rejig pieces that were so carefully assembled – if Da Vinci wanted to repaint the Mona Lisa doing a Gene Simmons tongue thing it'd be an adjustment, right?

SPEED GRACER

Instead of a grand journey, *Nightreign* starts with you picking a boss for a 30-ish minute run. To reach it, survive two 'days' of the circle shrinking in alt-Limgrave, each night culminating in its own tough boss battle. When I started by dropping onto the map from a spectral bird, the entrance was so *Fortnite*-coded I wondered if FromSoftware was joining the live service party with a battle pass and paid-for skins.

But that's not *Nightreign*.

PLAYED
IT

"We wanted to have a game that felt like a complete package out of the box on the day of purchase, so everything is unlockable... it's not what we'd consider a 'live service' game," says director Junya Ishizaki, who served as the battle director on *Elden Ring*. *Nightreign* will get some post-release balance updates, but beyond that? "We're still in the process of thinking about the possibilities," he says.

Nightreign is Ishizaki's baby: he'd been brewing game ideas when president Hidetaka Miyazaki suggested he try directing. He put together the pitch and got a green light. "The one [bit of guidance] that sticks out is that he basically said, 'Do it as you please,' for this project," Ishizaki says.

It's unusually straightforward for FromSoftware – no PvP, no esoteric multiplayer covenants. Preset 'heroes' with unique attributes replace the character creator. The lithe Duchess, for example, has a tiny HP pool but dodges with a *Bloodborne*-style quick step instead of a roll. Win or lose, you'll end a run with relics to equip in future sessions,



THE ARCHER

The archer wasn't in our preview, but will have a new "expanded targeting system" for third-person aiming not in *Elden Ring*.

WYLDER

All-rounder knight Wylder has a quick-cooldown grappling hook for dealing damage or closing the gap with bosses.

☞ offering a range of buffs. I found one that made my flask also heal my allies, a benefit when we had only four to quaff.

"The focus was condensing this experience down – the RPG elements, the exploration, the character building and levelling. We wanted that to feel like it was all coming together and culminating in a boss fight but in a more concentrated form," Ishizaki says. "For this new sense of accomplishment that you wouldn't quite find with *Elden Ring* or our previous titles, we felt like we needed some new

mechanics and some new elements to add into that mix. We've never really held the stance 'let's absolutely not do anything that other companies are doing or not follow any trends.' So we didn't really see this as chasing a trend, but we saw these as interesting elements that could work well within our multiplayer-focused session-based gameplay."

THIS IS THE RUN

My favourite thing about *Nightreign* is the addition of two unique abilities per

character that change how I play. They're not quite classes, but Duchess is a glass cannon DPS, able to double the damage she and her allies have just dished with her Restage ability. By day's end I was yelling, "Run it back!" to my co-op squadmate on Duchess whenever I closed a gap with knight Wylder's grappling hook skill and dropped my ult, a fiery charged explosion.

Nightreign's map is dotted with familiar ruins and forts. While the bosses and enemies you encounter in these locations vary from run to run, I am worried that



BOSS

The target of our session, this fire-breathing three-headed riff on Cerberus will be one of eight primary bosses in *Nightreign*, I'm told.

DUCHESS

Duchess was my favourite character in the preview thanks to her high speed and ability to cloak to drop aggro. Just don't get hit!

retracing my steps will get old. But Ishizaki says the map will sometimes see "large-scale changes to terrain in the form of procedurally appearing volcanos or swamps or forests," and hinted at some degree of meta progression with storylines for the hero characters and the map evolving in some way, too.

"We wanted the map itself to be a giant dungeon, so players have the chance to traverse and explore a different way every time they play. You have to choose the

boss you want to face at the end of the third day. Once you've made that choice, maybe you have an idea of how you want to strategise against that boss, and this might change how you approach the map. We wanted to offer players that agency, to

THEY'RE NOT QUITE CLASSES, BUT DUCHESS IS A GLASS CANNON DPS

decide, 'I need to go after a poison weapon this time to face this boss.'"

With lots of missing text, I can't say I developed any strategies better than "get more healing flasks". I hope that's a symptom of this build, and not indicative of what will be a richer, more varied strategic playspace in the final game. As different as *Nightreign* is from *Elden Ring* itself, I did get the sense that one thing is the same as it ever was: FromSoftware's still holding tight to plenty of secrets.

Wes Fenlon

PREVIEW

Avowed



ABOVE: Using the dodge to sidestep incoming arrows feels pretty sweet.

RIGHT: Off with 'is 'ead!





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

February 18, 2025

DEVELOPER

Obsidian Entertainment

PUBLISHER

Xbox Game Studios

LINK

avowed.obsidian.net

AVOWED

Obsidian's RPG is plenty familiar, but hits the finer details

I walked through the front doors of Obsidian Entertainment with a single-minded mission: find a gun in fantasy RPG *Avowed* as quickly as possible. So much of *Avowed* – which Obsidian has taken pains to point out is not a sweeping open world game like *Skyrim* – looks deeply traditional. Cosy. Unsurprising. But then there are the guns. Where else might it diverge from the stock fantasy playbook?

"The things that set *Avowed*, and really all the [*Pillars of Eternity*] games we've made in the world of Eora apart, are that blend of a very grounded political story and a very philosophical and metaphysical story," says director Carrie Patel. "You almost always have a player character with one foot in the world of the gods and souls and these strange, mysterious things, and another foot in the conflict between nations. That enables us to tell stories where the characters feel very grounded and relatable, but also still have some colour, and the quests you're encountering can mix those feelings of groundedness but also scale and epicness and wonder."

Patel has had the task of reining in expectations for *Avowed* while also making a case that it still has branching roleplaying and combat. If the dev team is feeling any pressure for *Avowed* to be a smash hit after five years in development, though – and Microsoft's last big RPG, *Starfield*, not exactly matching up to *Baldur's Gate III* – there's no sign of it.

PLAYED IT

As I played *Avowed* I kept hunting for the one special, amazing thing that would wow me. And, well, I didn't find it. But after a few hours, I started to think maybe I didn't need to.

GRIMOIRE AND DANGEROUS

As soon as I got clear of *Avowed*'s tutorial I found the first merchant in the town of Claviger's Landing and bought myself a cheap pistol. Then I equipped a grimoire in my off hand, which let me cast elemental spells without any actual proficiency with magic. The flexibility of *Avowed*'s classless system is exciting even at the start – I can't think of many RPGs I've played that mix magic and melee so freely.

Combat vaguely resembles *Skyrim* on the surface, but in the hands it feels much different, with a dodge and an action RPG-style stun meter on enemies that lets you fire off a special attack when it maxes out. It feels outright gamey in a way I didn't expect, with charge attacks, bursts of hitstop and arcade 'pings!' on critical hits.

"The challenge in RPGs is we want you to feel this progression throughout the game, but it can't start in a way that just feels crappy," says combat designer Max Matzenbacher, who's spent a great deal of time hand-tuning the feel of *Avowed*'s weapons. "We play with the timing of the animations, and we've spent a lot of time having the animation state change based on the type of hit. If it's a normal hit we're trying to get that connection to feel right; if it's a hit where you're fighting an enemy that's too strong for you, we kinda try to make it feel like you're hitting an immobile post. Camera shake in first-person makes the game too disorienting, so our UI team has gotten the HUD to shake."

At level one *Avowed*'s combat weighs in as a versatile welterweight – not quite manic Japanese-style character action, but not as weighty as a melee-focused brawler like *Warhammer: Vermintide 2*. I can't tell if it'll excel in either weight class as I level up and gain abilities, but I think mid and late-game *Avowed* is going to be a whole different fighter. Even early on it feels better than it looks in video, particularly when I'm ice-blasting charging enemies with the grimoire in my left hand and then popping off a headshot with the pistol in my right.

I EQUIPPED A GRIMOIRE IN MY OFF HAND, WHICH LET ME CAST ELEMENTAL SPELLS





➤ After fashioning myself as some sort of wizard pirate I took a tour through the nearby seaside shantytown before setting off in search of a missing ambassador I needed to have a chat with – then wandered back off the critical path and stumbled into a pair of grave robbers outside of town. I convinced the big one, Tiny, to run home. Unlike his partner, he agreed that was preferable to dying.

I spent about 45 minutes trying *Avowed's* third-person camera, and it works with only the occasional floatiness or awkward animation. Patel says the third-person camera was always planned, but it's listed as an accessibility option for those who struggle with first-person, the mode the game was clearly designed for. There's a hint of *Deus Ex*-style immersive sim DNA to the environments, which are brimming with climbable ledges and rooftop rewards for exploration. Where *Skyrim's* jump button existed exclusively for stuttering up barren mountainsides, *Avowed's* is useful and enriches the compact spaces Obsidian has designed.

I do love the mini-accomplishment of clambering my way onto a rooftop, but more importantly there's shit to do when you make your way up there; when I returned to that shantytown for a more thorough look, I barged into a second-storey door and discovered a quest awaiting with the hideaways inside.

"In a top-down game we know what you're going to see," says Berto Ritger, who serves as a region director on *Avowed*, helping shape its environments. "In this world you can look around, see the sky, see the moon for the first time in Eora. And you aren't always going to do what the devs necessarily want you to do. We want to lean into that and allow you to look up, see a lighthouse and wonder, 'Hmm, I wonder if I can climb up there.' And you can. We want to encourage that."

Avowed by default is awash in tutorials, map icons and quest markers, but thankfully offers granular controls over everything UI. When I turned off the arrows pointing me towards some talismans I needed to find in seagull nests scattered around the shantytown, I started spotting the telltale signs of bird poop speckling the walls and crates below

them. Some of those delicate touches were even a surprise to Patel.

"One of our area designers, Bre Seale, did a pass a couple months ago to refine all the pickables you can find in the world, to ensure there are sensible rules based on how they're placed," she says. "I put a Post-it note [over my minimap] and her placement was so strong and consistent I was able to find a lot of stuff. I started to recognise, oh, Soulsponge is placed near corpses or places where people have died, that's so cool. When you start to see this underlying logic to the world... I think it's a much more rewarding experience."

OUR STORY BEGINS

I started having way more fun in *Avowed* as I started really eyeing my surroundings, and was rewarded with item chests and other goodies everywhere. The exploration puts me in the immersive sim mindset, and there are a few interactable objects sensitive to elements like fire and lightning. At one point I wondered how to reach a mushroom growing over a pool, then spied a blue berry growing above it. I pulled out my bow and fired, and when the berry plopped into the water it created an icy platform.

That right there is my shit, but in *Avowed* these moments are hand-placed bits of garnish rather than protein. In many ways the world feels disappointingly artificial: you can't pick up and move objects, there's no dynamic weather or time of day, the townsfolk are largely static and have little or nothing to say. These are reasonable limitations in an RPG focused on dialogue and combat, but I wish *Avowed* had the scope to fully explore the possibilities of a richer simulation.

I liked but didn't love every piece of *Avowed* I saw. No writing sucked me in the way the voices in my head did in *Disco Elysium*; no quest stunned me like the Bloody Baron in *The Witcher 3*; no moment of environmental exploration struck me with the kind of staggering open-ended possibilities I found in *Baldur's Gate III*. Even so, I did start to really appreciate how well the pieces fit together. Maybe beyond its opening area there will be a moment *Avowed* does that one big thing that fully locks me into its vision. But maybe the unusually freeform combat and options that let you fully dial in how much guidance you want for exploration built atop Obsidian's trusty core of meaningful roleplaying will be just as good.

Wes Fenlon



I STARTED SPOTTING THE TELLTALE SIGNS OF BIRD POOP SPECKLING THE WALLS



ABOVE: Kai is pretty much Garrus Vakarian in disguise. Not a complaint.



LEFT: *Avowed's* environments really are packed with detail.

PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden

Soviet ships are somehow less ugly than their US counterparts.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Nov 12 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER
Triassic Games

PUBLISHER
Microprose Software

LINK
microprose.com

SEA POWER: NAVAL COMBAT IN THE MISSILE AGE

Take to the waves in
thousands of tons of steel



A Microprose game about Cold War naval battles? For gamers of a certain vintage, those words will come with expectations of a large cardboard box and a particularly thick manual, accompanied by at least four floppy disks. Sadly, in the age of Steam, we can no longer enjoy such luxuries.

FIRST
LOOK

For the ships in *Sea Power*, however, it's very much the age of diesel. The team at Triassic Games includes the lead designer of *Cold Waters*, the 2017 submarine sim developed and published by Killerfish Games, so there's an experienced hand on the tiller.

What we get here are some of the most exciting naval jet aircraft recreated in the Unity engine, as well as lumbering, missile-studded ships. It keeps its air fleet to the later stages of the Cold War,

with the A-5 Vigilante appearing in its recon plane form, but a more likely sight is some Harriers taking off from a flight deck only to be bounced by Iranian F-4 Phantoms. And that's just the US arsenal – Soviet and other powers' forces are represented too, and the mighty F-14 Tomcat makes an appearance for *Top Gun* aficionados.

Sea Power's combat takes a slower, more deliberate approach, however, than screaming jet dogfights. Being in charge of enormous, missile-armed naval vessels means you have a lot to take into account as you approach the enemy coast. Not only must you rely on surveillance aircraft, or send up a fighter screen to detect hostile aircraft, but there's electronic warfare, submarines

and ASW too, for sneakier ways to gain the upper hand in a fight. The deliberate nature of the real-time combat, and the relative slowness of the ships involved, leads to a gradual build of tensions that often come to a head in a flurry of extremely fast jets, missiles and close-in weapon systems.

THE NAVY LARK

So if you want to destroy Iranian aircraft and missile systems harassing the cargo ships you're escorting through the Strait of Hormuz, then you're at liberty to do so. Use the might of the Soviet fleet to dominate the Atlantic, or play as plucky freedom fighters taking on imperialist powers. There's also a level editor included in the game that allows you to set up all kinds of scenarios.

Improvements to the game's controls and enemy AI are next on the big list of things to do, along with adding more air, sea and land units, but *Sea Power* is already looking impressive, and feels like a modernisation of a classic PC gaming genre that has its roots all the way back to the likes of *Carrier Command*.

A FLURRY OF EXTREMELY FAST JETS, MISSILES AND CLOSE- IN WEAPON SYSTEMS



Those iconic Lara Croft poses, now in higher res.



TOMB RAIDER IV-VI REMASTERED

A second dose of Croft

Following the modest success of the first remastered *Tomb Raider* trilogy, it was as inevitable as the turning of a hidden ancient mechanism that the next three games in the series would meet the same fate. Thing is, games *IV*, *V* and *VI* – known here as the Darkness Trilogy – are a bit of a mixed bag.

Best of all is *IV* – 1999's *The Last Revelation* – in which Lara accidentally wakes up an ancient Egyptian god and goes on pyramid-based adventures to stop him ending the world. Game *V* is *Chronicles*, a series of flashbacks over Lara's life framed by her own funeral, and introduces stealth to the series as she slinks around New York. But she's not really dead, as while Core Design had tried to kill her off, the games' publisher wasn't having it. Last is *VI* – *The Angel of Darkness* – which was a buggy mess in 2003 but should hopefully get a smoother release 22 years on.

Once again, you can swap between modern and classic graphics, and the old-fashioned *Tomb Raider* tank controls get an update for today's controllers and preferences.

FIRST LOOK

RELEASE
Feb 14, 2025

DEVELOPER
Aspyr, Crystal Dynamics

PUBLISHER
Aspyr

LINK
s.team/a/2525380



Take a good lean and admire your woodworking skills.

FIRST LOOK

FINNISH COTTAGE SIMULATOR

Live in a house, a very big house, in the country

RELEASE
Nov 15 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER
Ranela Games

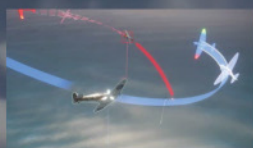
PUBLISHER
Ranela Games

LINK
s.team/a/1723780

Sitting in a sauna and beating yourself with a bundle of twigs is a bit of a first for videogames, but what is a creative medium

without the ability to surprise? *Finnish Cottage Simulator* offers all the bucolic joys of off-grid nordic property ownership, with hunting, fishing,

grilling, chopping logs, illegal alcohol distillation and all the other things they get up to in what claims to be the world's happiest country.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

Oct 30 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER

Slitherine Ltd

PUBLISHER

Slitherine Ltd

LINK

[s.team/a/1530450](https://steam/a/1530450)

SCRAMBLE: BATTLE OF BRITAIN

Strap in and prepare for turn-based tactics

The Battle of Britain, in which British fighter pilots stood up against Luftwaffe raids in the skies above England, feels like fertile ground for tactics games, as small bands of combatants manoeuvre in 3D space, trying to get into the best position before beginning an attack that they might not survive.

Scramble is turn-based, which prevents it from turning into a British version of *Homeworld*, and takes things like aerodynamics and a physical simulation of the way the planes move through the air – something Karan S'jet never had to worry about.

REACH FOR THE SKIES

It does this by splitting each turn into phases. The planning phase zooms right out so you can take in the full volume of the battlefield, plotting your moves in an attempt to intercept and destroy enemy aircraft, who will in turn be looking for you. The simulation phase sees your plans put into practice, and you get to appreciate the rolls, turns and hails of bullets in real-time. Then, in the review phase, you can scrub through the

manoeuvres, watching them from different angles and identifying what went right, and who needs help.

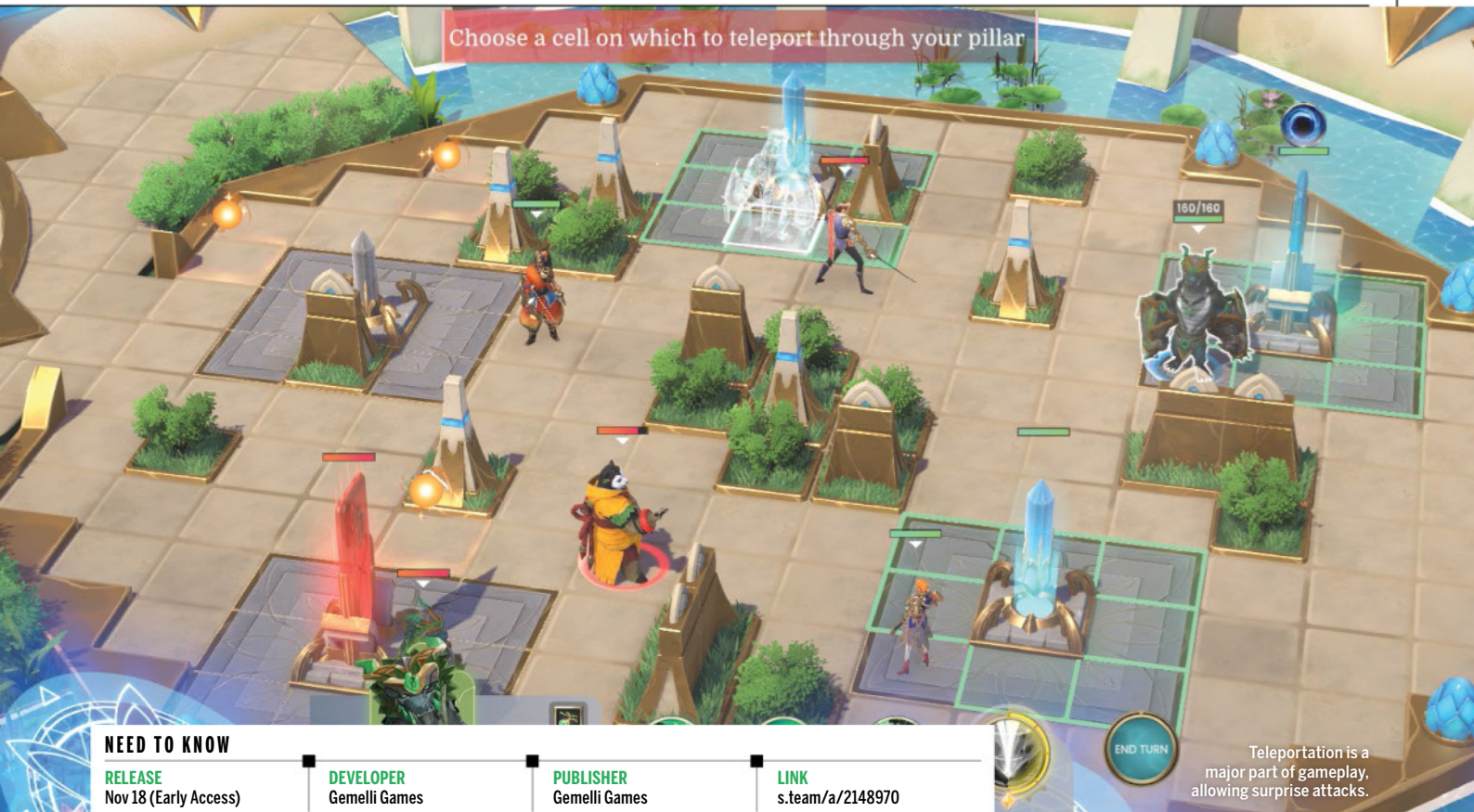
The battles are short, especially once bullets start flying, and can be over extremely quickly if you allow yourself to be ambushed or outmanoeuvred early on. Planning is essential and predicting enemy movements the key to good positioning, the game's interface is supremely clear in this regard with blue and red arrows picking out the flightpaths of friendly and allied aircraft so you can make a few seconds of sprayed gunfire really count.

At the moment, the game's control scheme – perhaps built with a controller in mind rather than the free camera of *Homeworld* and therefore limited – can hamper things, sticking itself to the back of a plane rather than allowing you to pan around the sky, but this is exactly the sort of thing that can be improved on with player feedback while in Early Access.

FIRST
LOOK



These fine machines were capable of over 400mph.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Nov 18 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER
Gemelli Games

PUBLISHER
Gemelli Games

LINK
s.team/a/2148970

Teleportation is a major part of gameplay, allowing surprise attacks.

SKYGARD ARENA

Finally, a legendary league of fantasy tactics

“**F**inal Fantasy Tactics meets League of Legends” reads the press release announcing turn-based tactics game *Skygard Arena*, a bold claim invoking two titans of their respective genres. Its blend of solo campaigning and PvP arena battles backs the boast, though its turn-based combat definitely favours one side of the comparison.

FIRST LOOK

With ‘Arena’ in the game’s title, the singleplayer portions of the game may come as a surprise. They’re story-based, and see a party of three heroes, each with two personas and primary, secondary and ultimate abilities, moving through maps that have a hint of a fantasy *XCOM 2* about them, with their high and low barriers, water features, mysterious glowing things and red and green squares denoting range and line of sight.

There’s nothing about the characters that suggests near-future guerrilla warfare though. Aiden is a tall, distinguished

wizard in a blue robe. Daerio is a sword-wielding pistol shooter straight out of the Three Musketeers. And Champei is a panda. Giant, not red. There are more, including a tiny cat on a floating cloud, a goth witch, begoggled inventor and lizard man, suggesting a dose of Blizzard in the game’s influence stew.

SKY’S THE LIMIT

The game’s roadmap currently points at a full release somewhere near the end of 2025, but for now there’s a decent amount of content on offer. An early chapter of the singleplayer adventure will be added to in the spring, and this part of the game is currently quite lightly populated. You start with a single champion, and unlock more as you

AN EARLY CHAPTER OF THE SINGLEPLAYER ADVENTURE WILL BE ADDED TO IN SPRING

progress, which leads to new ways to tackle the levels. Over in multiplayer, the game is getting new champions, arenas and stat-modifying Artifacts too.

Arena matches last 20 minutes, and aim to keep up a fast pace, despite the turn-based nature of proceedings. This means multiple actions per turn, teleportation between captured pillars, and a focus on skill rather than microtransactions. The pillars are the core of the game, as capturing them not only allows you more movement options, but an all-out assault on an opponent’s main pillar can win you the match – it’s not the only path to victory, however, and a defensive playstyle that relies on the points you score from capturing control points is just as viable.

The overarching plot is standard fare, with a world shattered following a cataclysm, and champions clashing at a tournament to win a crown that may grant ultimate power. As long as the devs can keep it balanced and fresh through all the new content drops, *Skygard* looks like being a potentially interesting addition to the multiplayer tactics genre.

BE THE RESISTANCE

THE AWARD-WINNING SERIES RETURNS WITH NEW LEAD OPERATIVE HARRY HAWKER. JOIN THE FRENCH RESISTANCE TO STOP THE NAZIS DEVELOPING A POWERFUL NEW 'WONDER WEAPON' AND CHANGING THE COURSE OF THE ENTIRE WAR.



X-RAY KILL CAM RETURNS AS BULLETS
DEFLECT OFF BONES RIPPING
UNPREDICTABLE NEW PATHS



EXPERIENCE TOTAL COMBAT
AUTHENTICITY IN JAW-DROPPING
NEW LOCATIONS



SNEAK, SNIPE AND ELIMINATE
ENEMIES IN NEW PROPAGANDA
MISSIONS!

REBELLION



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REMA



HIST

K I N G

Over 30 years
after the original,
CIVILIZATION VII
proves Firaxis ain't
out of ideas yet

By Tyler Wilde

O R Y



'm Niccolò Machiavelli, emperor of the Han Dynasty, and Harriet Tubman's archers are menacing the farmers on my southern border. What a pickle. I ought to stand up for myself, but can I really denounce the hero of the Underground Railroad? It doesn't feel right, so instead I spend *Civilization VII*'s new Influence currency to steal a piece of technology from the famous abolitionist. Is that problematic? Stealing the idea for bronze working from Harriet Tubman?

More to the point: has *Civilization* jumped the shark? The turn-based grand strategy games have always been abstractions, allowing players to, say, found the United States in 10,000 BC as immortal autocrat George Washington, but this meeting of ancient China, Renaissance political philosophy, and the American Civil War was still a little jarring. There are so

many other changes in the seventh main entry in the series – including a new three-act structure – that I can understand the reaction some had to *Civ VII*'s announcement, “We just wanted new graphics, what's this?”

The option to mix-and-match civs and leaders, who aren't necessarily historical heads of state anymore, can generate some odd situations, but after playing for several hours and speaking to the developers, one thing I can say for sure is that Firaxis' passion for history is undiminished.

Firaxis senior historian Dr Andrew Johnson told me that the whole reason he works on *Civilization* is to spread appreciation

for history. “I teach undergraduates in my other life, and my God, man, they don't read,” he told me. “If [playing *Civilization*] can provoke somebody into an interest in history, that is what's important here.”

Even *Civilization VII*'s narrator, actress Gwendoline Christie of *Star Wars* and *Game of Thrones* fame, is a history buff according to audio director Justin Drust, who describes himself the same way. “The recording process is amazing because she's continually asking for context for any of the lines,” he says.

“We're all a bunch of history nerds,” senior art director Jason Johnson told me. He and the others were especially delighted by Firaxis' collaboration with the present-day Shawnee tribe to include the Shawnee civilisation and leader Tecumseh.

“The relationship we had with even the Shawnee was just the coolest,” says J Johnson. “Here I am working with the actual Shawnee Nation, figuring out what it would look like if some of these buildings existed that never did exist, and to be able to keep it within the realm of believability, of historical relevance, was really, really cool.”

Other leaders in *Civ VII*'s starting roster never saw the

spotlight in my American education, such as Trung Trac, Vietnam's first queen, and Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire. And in some ways, *Civ VII* is actually more buttoned

up than its predecessors: the colour saturation has been turned down from *Civ VI*, and features like navigable rivers add fidelity to the simulation. So, don't worry, *Civ* hasn't gone off the rails. Creative director Ed Beach just wants us to finish the game now and then.

STARTING OVER

“The number one thing that we kept wanting to fix is the fact that *Civilization* was such a long experience that, I wouldn't say nobody was getting to the end, but a surprisingly small number of people were making it all the way to the end,” Beach tells me.

FIRAXIS' PASSION FOR HISTORY IS UNDIMINISHED



ABOVE: It's plunderin' time.

RIGHT: Bony reaching for his copy of PC Gamer magazine.

BELOW: Notre Dame when it opened the first time.





My sister actually sees some of her *Civ* games to conclusion – she tries to master each leader, playing as one repeatedly until she’s achieved a satisfyingly decisive victory – but that apparently puts her in the minority. (I knew I wasn’t the weird one!) I’m one of the incorrigible starter-overers Beach is referring to: somewhere in the middle of a game, with my options constricted and a protracted war with Japan or Norway or whomever bogging down each turn, I give in to

the siren call of that breezy early exploration phase. The solution offered by *Civilization VII* is: what if you could start over without actually starting over? The game is divided into three ages, Antiquity, Exploration and Modern, and although the start of a new age doesn’t reset the world, there’s enough of a whiff of early game freshness to it that I might be convinced to go for one more turn, and then another, and so on into the early morning – that’s how it goes.



Before things get better, though, they get worse: just before the dawn of a new age, the world faces a random crisis. As the Antiquity Age closed, my settlements lost faith in the authority of the capital, and I was forced to choose crisis policies which applied negative effects to my civ. All you can do is pick the least bad ones, and feel some comfort in the knowledge that your opponents have to do the same. The policies tanked happiness in my towns, which were already suffering from war

30 YEARS OF CIV *A history of history games*



CIVILIZATION 1991

Sid Meier built the first *Civilization* on a \$10,000 Compaq Deskpro 386 (which still works).



CIVILIZATION II 1996

One player famously played a single campaign for a decade, dubbed The Forever War.



CIVILIZATION III 2001

The first *Civilization* developed by Firaxis, founded in a split from MicroProse.



CIVILIZATION IV 2005

The first fully 3D *Civilization* featured the first ever piece of game music to win a Grammy.



CIVILIZATION V 2010

Big changes: replaced the square grid with hexes, and instituted a one-unit-per-tile rule.



CIVILIZATION VI 2016

Expanded cities, allowing their urban districts to sprawl over multiple tiles in the game.



☞ weariness due to an off-again-on-again conflict with Rome. One of my towns revolted and wound up in the hands of a different neighbouring civ. It was just the kind of situation that would normally tempt me into starting over.

But then the curtains fell, the crisis was over, and the Exploration Age began. I was granted the option to move my capital, given a new tech tree to conquer, and Han China was no more.

NEW AGE, NEW ME

Civ VII is in some ways more historical than the previous games: You can no longer invent agriculture as the United States, because each age has an exclusive selection of civilisations. Han China was my Antiquity civ, but I was prompted to choose a new one after being thrust into the Exploration Age, with options determined by my choice of leader and my actions in the previous age. I picked Spain.

Alright, maybe Han China's instant transformation into the

Spanish Empire doesn't entirely help my claim that *Civ VII* is more historical, but it did contribute to that feeling of freshness without entirely overwriting my past achievements. The residential buildings in my urban city districts morphed into Spanish buildings, but the granaries and temples built during my Han period remained, as did the Great Wall segments I'd constructed – functional reminders of the past.

The Great Wall, by the way, is now a special building that Han China can construct across multiple city districts. When I complained to Beach that I hadn't been able to extend it across my border in an unbroken line, he remarked that, in that case, I had built a historically accurate Great Wall. It didn't make me feel better about it.

Buildings from a previous age lose their adjacency bonuses, encouraging you to build over them with updated equivalents. The notion that 'history is built in layers' drove the design, inspired by London's origin as the Roman Londinium and the

UNLIKELY ENEMIES

A battle of wits and determination



HARRIET TUBMAN

Attributes: Diplomatic, Militaristic

Known for: The Underground Railroad, Civil War reconnaissance, women's suffrage.



NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI

Attributes: Diplomatic, Economic

Known for: Saying that it's actually fine to murder people, if you're a ruler and it's for a good reason.



subsequent demolition and overbuilding that formed today's sprawling city, whose original walls exist only in pieces now.

Civilization VII's new narrative events add some extra flavour to this process: pave over an ancient temple, for instance, and you might unearth a relic from your past. Aside from substantial bonuses, narrative events are another opportunity for historian Dr Johnson and narrative designer Dr Rue Taylor to layer in historical flavour – as Han China, I encountered a philosopher musing about an aspect of Confucianism, for example.

But back to Spain. After the age transition, my units also transformed from their Han Dynasty incarnations into Spanish equivalents, and my naval units could immediately traverse deep ocean tiles, but took damage while they did it until I'd advanced further along the Exploration Age tech tree.

I was now encouraged to explore the Distant Lands across the oceans, and there's potential for more

historical awkwardness here. It makes obvious sense for Spain to try to conquer the world, but what does the Exploration Age mean for civilisations that were those distant lands from the perspective of the colonial powers? *Civilization* already frames the history of civilisation as something that can be won – arguably an essential character flaw in an age when threats like climate change demand global cooperation – and the invitation to build a navy and cross the ocean seems to prescribe a method. Perhaps not, though.

“For me, the Exploration Age is about that age of interconnection,” says Dr Johnson, who puts *Civilization*'s rendition of the period between around 500 and 1800. “Yes, you have the high age of European colonisation in there. But you've also got the Indian Ocean trade. You've also got the Pax Mongolica, you've got that trade across The Steppe. You have the caravans on the Sahara, you have a whole lot of other kinds of things going on. And the way the game is structured, you don't have to be a coloniser to win. There are victory conditions that have nothing to do with colonisation. But on the flip side, going out, exploring, and settling new lands is, yes, something that non-European powers did.”

ART OF WAR

Whatever the historical motivation, exploring the world in *Civilization* games is fun, and this is the first *Civ* game where I'm excited to reveal the capital cities of other civs not just for the strategic intel, but to get a look at them. Among the complaints some players had with *Civilization VI* was that the somewhat grimy, wargame-like maps of *Civilization V* had been brightened and smoothed over. Jason Johnson was *Civ VI*'s lead environment artist, and he still “really, really” likes the look they settled on for that game, but equipped with improved tech and

a desire to try something new, I think he and Firaxis have outdone themselves with *Civ VII*'s look.

Johnson says he's “obsessed” with miniatures, dioramas and model trains

– not that I would have doubted him, but the RC tank and stack of terrariums sitting behind him on our video call immediately suggest that this is a guy who can handle a hot glue gun. “I'm an only child,” says the senior art director, “so I would spend all this time in museums looking at dioramas and just staring at them and telling a story: what was going on in this non-animated scene?”

That childhood love of miniatures is the source of the “readable realism” style that Firaxis settled on.

NEW NARRATIVE EVENTS ADD SOME EXTRA FLAVOUR TO THIS PROCESS



ABOVE: An enticing glimpse at the later game.



Looks like a lovely destination for a mini-break.



MIXED ARCHITECTURE

This Norman city wasn't always a Norman city. Relics of the past stick around in the transitions between ages.

IMPROVEMENTS

Rural tiles are automatically granted improvements like farms, plantations and mines when you incorporate them into a city – the worker unit has been retired.

✎ Seeing big renders of *Civ VII*'s military units made me feel bad for having paid so little attention to them while I was playing. Distracted by concerns over my neighbours growing power – Tubman is a militaristic type – I didn't spend much time examining the expressions on the soldiers' faces. But they do have expressions: they're more or less realistic from a distance, but with simplified and exaggerated features when viewed up close.

The engine and techniques in play have changed dramatically since *Civ VI*'s launch eight years ago. Each unit used to be a standalone 3D model, for instance, but now they make human figures and then dress them up for the part, varying the costumes in groups so that you can pick out each soldier's role. The environments are more detailed, not just in terms of their look but also their generation, with rainfall models informing the distribution of vegetation.

**A TOWN CAN
EVENTUALLY
BE CONVERTED
INTO A CITY**





A GIRAFFE

There's a giraffe here. I'm not really sure why, but I thought I'd point it out to emphasise the amount of detail in *Civ VII*'s cities.

WALLS

Walls can be built around multiple urban districts, and invaders must crush them all to capture the city centre.

And the cityscapes are stunning. I like that walls can be built in each city district, connecting to form big enclosures that are much clearer than the pebble piles that surrounded *Civ VI* city centres. They not only look more daunting for would-be siege armies, they are more daunting. Their increased visual prominence reveals something important about *Civ VII*'s design, making them a particularly notable example of the "readable" bit of "readable realism".

WALLS AND WORDS

Settlers no longer go out and found full-fledged cities in *Civilization VII*. They found towns, which have no production queue, generating wealth instead. A town can eventually be converted into a city, but you don't have to and it isn't necessarily your best choice: you could instead give a town a permanent specialisation, turning it into a dedicated mining town, as one example. One disadvantage of towns is that they



aren't as defensible as cities: they're only allowed to have walls around their central hex, and the structure has to be purchased with gold since towns have no production capability. Cities, on the other hand, can build many walled districts, and all of them have to be bulldozed by invaders before they can capture the city centre. As badass as my Han Dynasty repeating crossbow infantry were, crossing the Rubicon to pelt Rome's ramparts felt pretty futile – but I



captured and lost more than one town during my session.

"We sort of deliberately made it so towns should be switching hands back and forth between players," Beach told me. "And that's sort of a nice change from *Civ VI*, where it got to the point where, once everyone had put up walls, all those cities were just so hard to finally get all the way down to zero hit points, and it just took forever to conquer cities."

As you'd expect from Machiavelli, one of my big victories came without firing a shot. After an ally drew me into my first war with Rome (we didn't get along), I spent Influence to inflict war weariness on my enemy, reducing its combat effectiveness and depleting its settlements of Happiness. The exhausted empire eventually handed me the keys to Ravenna in exchange for peace.

Diplomacy and intrigue are tough concepts to make fun in strategy games. Former *Civilization* designer Soren Johnson gave a talk a couple years ago in which he said that *Civ III*'s bargaining table, where you can

fiddle with trade proposals until the other leader accepts, had been "a big mistake" because players would just tweak their offers gold piece by gold piece until the AI leader accepted it.

That screen still exists in *Civ VII* – it's how I informed Rome that the price for peace was Ravenna – but most non-military interaction is now accomplished by spending Influence. I spent Influence to steal tech from Tubman, establish alliances, start joint projects like festivals, befriend city-states, reconcile with a former enemy and more. Since there's no point in not spending Influence unless saving it up with some purpose in mind, I put it to work, and that's how I wound up with pacts that drew me into foreign conflicts. "It is a little trickier to stay on the fringes now than it used to be," says Beach, "and I credit that pretty much to the new mechanical approach and rethink we've had on diplomacy".

Playing the diplomatic game now means optimising for Influence and spending it on the right things at the right time: do I want to burn some of

MINIATURE MEN

The delightful details of a Roman legion

1
LORICA
SEGMENTATA
Fiddly straps
and buckles.

2
SCUTUM
The best defence is
a good offence. The
next best is a shield.

3
GALEA
Also useful
for dusting
shelves.





my stash on a friendly greeting or a military pact, or focus on befriendng city states? I prefer those transparent strategic decisions over pretending to negotiate with AI leaders, and Beach says that the new system works well in multiplayer, too.

"It used to be diplomacy and multiplayer was sort of a non-event at all," he told me. "It was just what you could do in terms of inner-talk between the players to try to convince them to help you. But now there's actually levers you can pull using the Influence system that actually are actual, true game mechanics that are influencing how a multiplayer game is unfolding. I've had multiplayer games where everyone decided that the war weariness system was over tuned, and so as soon as I got into war, my whole design team all ganged up on me and put support to the other player in the war so that I would be crippled by how bad the war weariness was. And, yes, I approved some changes to the balance of that afterwards."

HISTORY REPEATING

Influence is my favourite of *Civ VII*'s new systems, but I've skimmed over or entirely omitted many of its features and changes. There's always room to add more leaders and civs – *Civ VI* has been absolutely stuffed

with them over its eight years – but with religion and natural disasters and more already in *Civ VII* at launch, I have to wonder how Firaxis plans to expand it with its usual DLC. Beach wouldn't say, of course, but he says that the team is "looking at new approaches for how to do big drops of content like expansions".

"I think what you have identified is correct, that this game is pretty darn complete right here at launch," he says. "It has a density of systems in it that approaches – probably not *Civ VI* with all the expansions and all the extra Leader Passes and everything else, just because it

doesn't have as many civs and leaders – but in terms of game systems, it's already quite robust."

If tradition holds, *Civ VII* will be met with delight, scepticism, and

vigorous criticism from long-time players. Some will embrace the new game's quirks, and some will stick with *Civ VI*, or *Civ V*, or an even earlier game. Others will say that they'll pick it up after the expansions make it complete, whatever they may be. After over 30 years of *Civ*, there are strong opinions about how it ought to be, but Firaxis has always tried new things over those years, learning from competitors and pursuing ideas with a confidence that few other studios match. ■

ONE OF MY BIG VICTORIES CAME WITHOUT FIRING A SHOT



ABOVE: The units are comically large, but how else would you appreciate their cool outfits?



Only cities can build multiple walled districts.

PC GAMER

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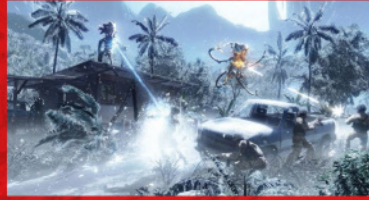


DIS- COST



The making
of **CRYSIS**, PC
gaming's most
notorious rig-killer

By Rick Lane



When Ubisoft published *Far Cry* on March 23, 2004, it was a watershed moment in gaming. Casting players as an ex-soldier battling mercenaries across a tropical archipelago, *Far Cry* dragged first-person shooters out of tight linear corridors into vast, open-ended levels. A glimpse of gaming's future, *Far Cry* was a hit, selling 2.5 million copies and spawning one of the most successful shooter series' of the last 20 years.

Inside Crytek, the neophyte German studio that had developed *Far Cry*, the general feeling was euphoric. "The ego was boosted across the board," says Cevat Yerli, Crytek's founder and former CEO, and *Far Cry*'s director. "Everybody was like, 'We can build *Far Cry 2* in a year!'" Ubisoft was likewise keen for Crytek to capitalise upon its success, and follow-up *Far Cry* with a rapidly-produced sequel using its remarkable CryEngine tech.

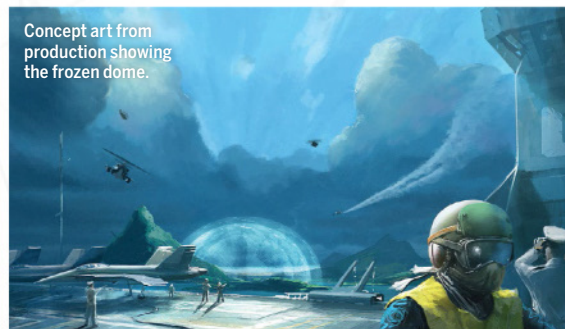
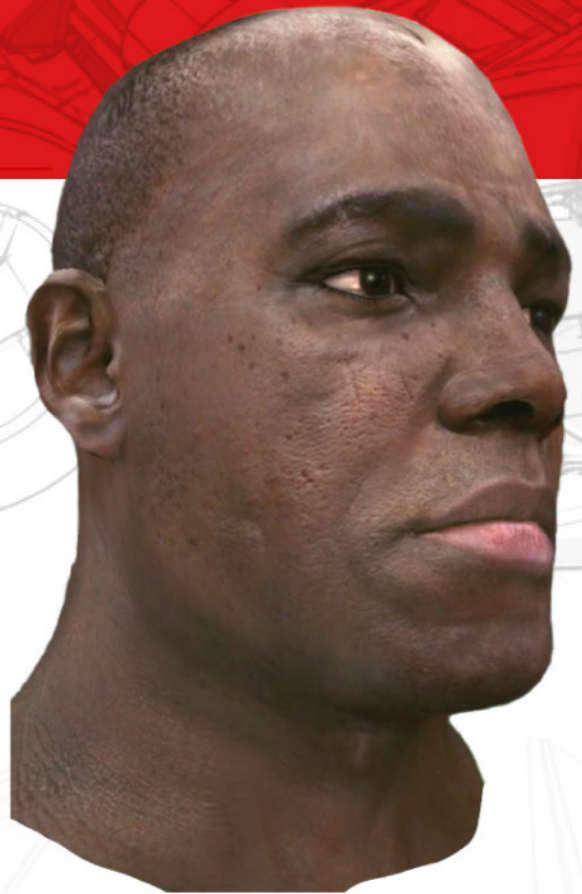
But Yerli wasn't so sure. "We had never done a game before as a team," he explains. "When you think you know how to do it, often that's when people stumble and make huge mistakes. So I said, 'Is there a way for us to manifest that learning and that excitement?' I want to be sure we are not a culture that goes into 'sequelitis' like, sequel after sequel."

Instead, Yerli wanted to take everything Crytek had learned from making *Far Cry*, and use it to rebuild everything they'd made from the ground up. He wanted to establish a whole new IP and build it in a whole new engine, one that would push everything *Far Cry* did further than before. "I said to the team, 'Let's look at how we focus on true innovation, and let's, let's push ourselves again, a lot harder.'" It was in this moment when *Crysis*, PC gaming's most storied, memetic son, was born.

UP AND RUNNING

For anyone remotely familiar with PC gaming, *Crysis* needs no introduction. Synonymous with PC gaming's desire to push hardware to (and often beyond) its limits, Crytek's second FPS is one of the defining texts of the platform, more so even than *Far Cry*. Yet most people would probably not introduce it as 'true innovation' in the way Yerli does. From a game design perspective, it is largely an iteration upon *Far Cry*, playing with many of the same rules and ideas established by its older brother.

From a technological perspective, *Crysis* can accurately be described as revolutionary. Moreover, it was born out of a desire to give the world something it had never seen before. "*Crysis* before *Crysis* was called *Frozen Paradise*, as a codename," Yerli says. "We figured, 'What would be cool, what kind of scenario have people never seen before, neither in movies nor in games?'"



Yerli knew he wanted *Far Cry*'s follow-up to remain set in a jungle, because "deserts actually were done quite often, or cities and other environments". But he also didn't want to do a straight repeat of *Far Cry*'s tropical islands. "And we said, 'OK, how about we freeze the jungle?'" he explains. "This environment that should be sunny and beautiful and paradisiacal is now like the whole air freezes on your neck. It provides the feeling [that] death is awaiting you in this juxtaposition of beauty and coldness."

Much of *Crysis*' broader concept followed on from this. Crytek asked itself what kind of phenomena could possibly freeze a tropical environment, concluding that the only feasible answer was alien technology. "I want[ed] to make something more science fiction," Yerli explains. "And I wanted to use science fiction as a liberty to create new gameplay." The nanosuit would



eventually derive from this sci-fi focus. Aliens also made a focal point for a twist, which meant the game needed an adversary for the earlier part of the game. For this, Crytek settled on North Korean forces, which were more original than Nazi or Soviet forces, and less ethically knotty than the Middle East.

Crytek assembled all these ideas into a 'master screenshot', which encapsulated the game's premise. "We built a screenshot where we had a jungle all around, and then we had this dome that froze everything within [it]. And then [around] that dome, we had some aliens fighting against people. The project became *Operation Frozen Paradise*, and then eventually it became *Crysis*."

MAXIMUM STRENGTH

Crytek knew the game it wanted to make. Now the studio had to start building it. From the start, Yerli had wanted to build Crytek's next game in a new engine, as he was unsatisfied with CryEngine 1, despite it being a technical marvel of its own. "We were patching up a lot of things on the engine, and it didn't feel right," he says. This included, but was not limited to, a complete rewrite of the graphics renderer. "You build an engine and a game, and then you realise you could have done the engine better," Yerli observes.

Alongside this, Crytek needed to be able to create a frozen jungle, something CryEngine 1 was simply not built to do. "It allowed us to drill

FROM A TECH PERSPECTIVE, CRYISIS CAN BE ACCURATELY DESCRIBED AS REVOLUTIONARY

TOP: *Crysis*' original codename was *Operation Frozen Paradise*, which feels suitably apt.

into things like snow shaders, frozen shaders," Yerli says. "Some of this work was really cool. The shader work that came out of this was mind blowing at times." In addition, Yerli wanted to push their representation of jungles forward wholesale, specifically pursuing not photorealism, but video realism.

"Video realism was about things in motion should look real, as opposed to [in] screenshots," Yerli says. "Video realism allowed us to study motion blur, depth of field, animations, physical reactions." The emphasis on physicality in *Crysis*, the authentic sense of weight, impact and momentum the game has, also derived from this. "Breakable trees came out of this, right? Where we said we got to have destruct[able] vegetation," Yerli adds.

Crytek sent a research team to Haiti to document how jungle environments looked and moved. "They took a gazillion photos and videos, and they studied the

ROLL CALL

Here's a reminder of your squadmates



AZTEC

Harold 'Aztec' Cortez is killed almost immediately after the opening HALO drop. If you remembered his name, congrats.



JESTER

Martin 'Jester' Hawker lasts slightly longer than Aztec, before being whisked away and brutally killed by a large alien machine.



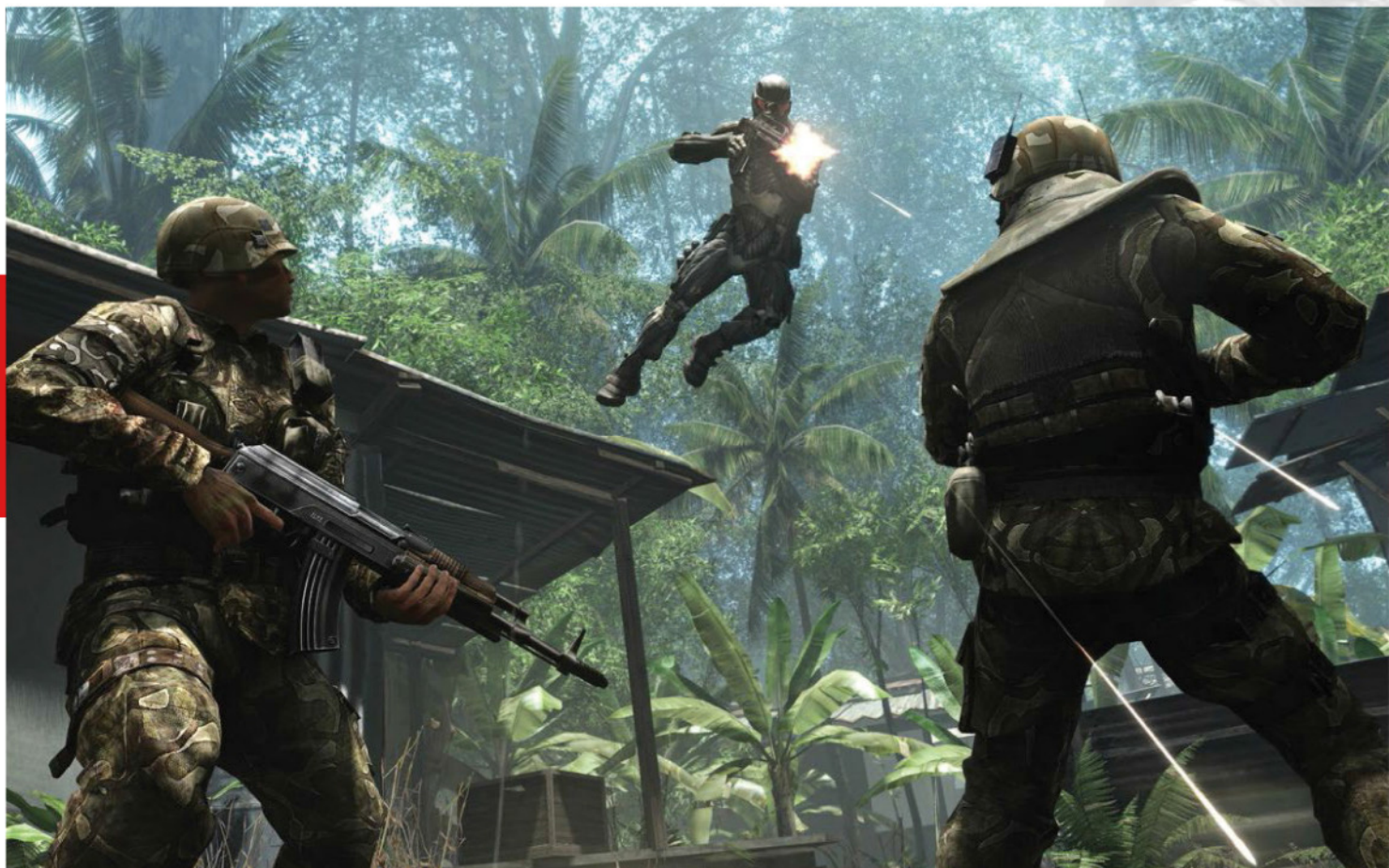
PSYCHO

The most memorable member of Raptor squad, hot-headed cockney Martin 'Psycho' Sykes later starred in *Crysis*' expansion pack.



PROPHET

Arguably the true protagonist of the series, Prophet is killed at the start of *Crysis 2*. But his nanosuit memorises his personality.



light interactions with the trees and the canopies for god rays, and subsurface scattering... this soft, green translucency where the sun is behind [the leaf]," Yerli says. "Subsurface scattering was a technology that existed already in engines, but was super slow," he explains. "Nobody had done it at scale."

Indeed, creating the jungle environment that Crytek wanted for *Crysis* meant resolving one of the oldest dilemmas in 3D graphics tech. "The rule was: if you want photorealism, you had to bake the lights, and the shadows," Yerli says. Baked lights are pre-rendered lightmaps that are 'baked' into textures on walls and floors, like a

coffee stain on a tablecloth. This makes them far cheaper to render than dynamic lights, but means they're forever fixed in place. "If you want to have dynamic worlds, your polycounts had to be low, and your lights and shadows had to be ugly," Yerli adds.

For *Crysis*, Yerli wanted high-quality dynamic lights and shadows, illuminating an open world environment. And that wasn't all, rendering a realistic jungle required vegetation in abundance, grass, bushes, trees, creepers, ferns. Moreover, that vegetation had to rustle, sway, and respond to physical interactions like characters brushing past. "We were simulating the trees for physics. We were bending them



TOP: *Crysis*' jungle environments were breathtaking on release, and still look fantastic today.

ABOVE: Drivable vehicles added choice in how gamers could navigate the *Crysis*' vast open levels.

WARHEAD

Here's a selection of guns from *Crysis*' arsenal



SCAR

Crysis' fantastically versatile assault rifle let you attach a sniper-scope, a grenade launcher, a silencer and sleeper darts.



XM2014

An excellent example of the form, and there was nothing more satisfying than blasting an enemy before immediately turning invisible.



LAW

Crysis' single-use rocket launcher is not only incredibly satisfying, but essential for dealing with tanks.

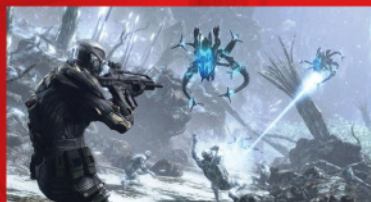


MOAC

Short for 'Molecular Accelerator', using the Moac was one of the stronger elements of *Crysis*' third act.

in different wind directions, and then eventually the light and the shadows will be all in real time, all the way to subsurface scattering on the leaves," Yerli says. This led to the studio joking, not entirely inaccurately, that in *Crysis*, "One tree has more technology built in than the entire algorithm for rendering *Far Cry*."

Crucially, Crytek didn't just apply this tech to trees, it also applied it to the characters moving about the game world. "There's a skin shader, the eyes are shaded correctly. Even the eye had like shadow within the eyeballs. Shadow maps [are] calculated for the face itself. So when the light was shining from a certain angle, the nose would cast a shadow." *Crysis* even had a shader that could make characters blush if required. "We went over bonkers on this one," Yerli says.



LEFT: The visual design of *Crysis*' alien enemies was based on cephalopods.



FAR RIGHT: The sense of power *Crysis*' mode-switching nanosuit gave you was incredible.



NANO A MANO

In CryEngine 2, Crytek had world-leading tech to make their game with, more advanced than anything id Software or Valve or Epic had designed up to that point. But as the studio began to build and playtest levels, Yerli found himself unsatisfied with the results. "I was getting a bit angry," he says. "It was feeling like a much better version of *Far Cry* with aliens, but it didn't have any innovation on the hero." Crytek looked around at other popular FPS games, like *Halo* and *Half-Life*, concluding that their character needed a suit. "This idea of a programmable suit came up. And the way I was imagining it is, 'OK what are the different play styles that people have in shooters?' For example, when you play *Quake*, you play in a different way than when you play *Counter-Strike*," Yerli explains. "And then I was wondering, can I incorporate these play styles into one person, then you choose what you want to do?"

Crytek broke down the mechanical variables shooters have, like movement speed, jump height, damage resistance etc, and switched them from being passive traits to active abilities, all governed by a shared resource pool. When activated, these abilities allowed players could to sprint at *Sonic*-like

THE NANOSUIT'S ABILITIES GAVE CRYISIS' COMBAT A RICHER, MORE VARIED FEEL THAN FAR CRY

speeds, punch through walls, shrug off bullets and turn invisible.

The nanosuit's abilities gave *Crysis*' combat a richer, more varied feel than *Far Cry*, treading on the toes of immersive RPG design in a way that heralded the trajectory of many later open world games. Helping players manage these abilities during a firefight proved a problem, however. "We had a whole UI mini-menu that almost micro-managed all the powers. And that [was] way too slow in the heat of the action," Yerli explains. "I said I needed a much faster, easier way to access [them] and it has to be on the mouse during the fight. So we came up with this radial menu."

The most difficult aspect of the suit to come with, however, was its visual design, which took an entire year. "We went through hundreds of concept arts, and they all looked like Marvel [characters] at the end. I did

not want it to look like a Marvel creation," Yerli says. "I wanted to ground it on technology." One suggestion was made for the suit to be more of an exoskeleton. "But exoskeletons are ugly. Is there a way to make an exoskeleton without the exoskeleton?" Yerli asked. "This muscle suit came up, with nanofibres that would then connect with your muscle tissues and sync with your movements."

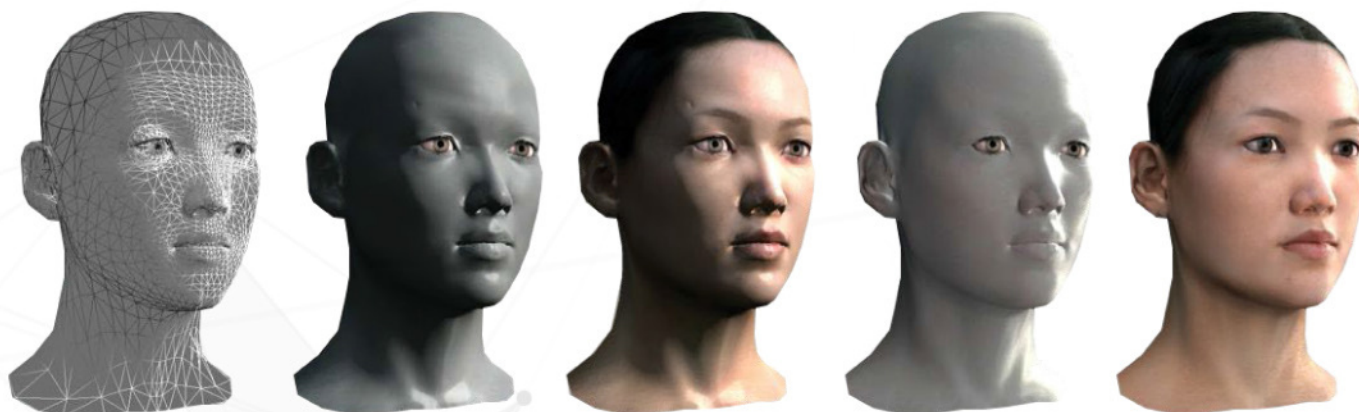
To Yerli, this felt like a more plausible nanosuit design, and was the one Crytek decided to go with. The decision was validated when Crytek launched the dedicated *Crysis* website, themed heavily around the nanosuit. "I got invited to a nanotechnology conference as a keynote speaker," he says. "I said, 'Excuse me, but this is all fake'."

CRYISIS AVERTED

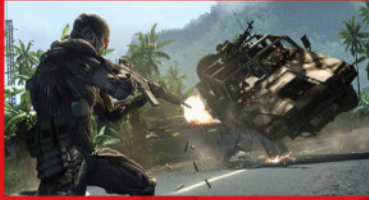
Yerli describes the development of *Crysis* as being "a lot more intense" than that of *Far Cry*, but also "a lot more organised". Across the development of *Crysis*, the studio increased in size from 65 to 200 people, making it a much larger ship to steer. *Crysis* also took a year longer than *Far Cry* to develop, and 18 months longer than Crytek itself initially scoped for.

Nonetheless, lessons had been learned. When the studio made the

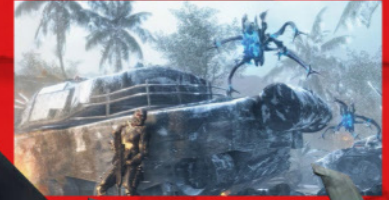
BELOW: Characters in *Crysis* benefitted from a dedicated skin shader and face shadow maps.



Crysis



LEFT: John Woo would be proud!



decision to rewrite CryEngine's renderer again, it happened halfway through development, rather than two months out from launch. Crytek also had a new publisher for *Crysis* in the form of EA, who were "a lot more demanding" than Ubisoft, but also crucial in keeping Crytek's much bigger team on task. "If we would have worked with EA on our first game, I think we would have not survived EA," Yerli says.

The biggest challenge Crytek faced on *Crysis* was designing the latter third of the game, which caused problems that Yerli admits were never fully resolved. This began with the zero-gravity level, in which protagonist Nomad ventures inside the alien spaceship. "Act three, the zero-G environment was a bit of a beast to tame, and changed the tone of the game a lot," he says.

Yerli believes the third act of *Crysis* introduced too many new elements. Following the zero-G section, Crytek introduces the frozen jungle, and switches the Korean soldiers, which players had become adept at fighting at this point, out for flying aliens. The approach to

designing these extraterrestrial foes caused a rift within Crytek. "We had two camps in the company, where one was like, 'Let's build humanoid aliens,' and the other one was like, 'Let's build aliens that are maybe looking familiar to some degree, meaning they have some kind of cousin on Earth, but are still aliens'"

Crytek opted to create aliens inspired by cephalopods. Yerli loved the designs of the aliens at the time, but in hindsight considers them a mistake. "It would have been better for us if the aliens had been not what they were, and [had been] more

humanoid and had a better story to explain why they're humanoid."

In general, Yerli says that from a gameplay perspective, the final third of *Crysis* "didn't work as well as we hoped it would" and that Crytek became overly focused on driving the story to its conclusion. "We tried a few concepts to keep the openness of the game, but were constrained by narrative, so we were focused on much more pushing the narrative of the game, as opposed to letting people explore." Although Yerli doesn't say so specifically, it's also possible the latter third of the game was victim to cuts. Certainly, as was the case with *Far Cry*, *Crysis*' scope was substantially pared back from initial plans. "There was a lot more content planned, and we had to pull characters and all that," Yerli says. "We cut it twice [in] half."

AMBIVALENT MEME

The run up to *Crysis*' launch was smoother than that of *Far Cry*, but still fraught with nerves. Yerli wanted to get the "packed list" of pre-launch bugs and issues to fix down to 1,000, but with weeks to go, there were 20,000 issues still to be resolved. "The game quality wasn't cutting it," Yerli says. He fretted over what review scores the game would get. "I estimated it was an 80-something title, 80-plus in my mind."

Crysis released on November 13, 2007 in the US, and three days later in the EU. Yerli recalls receiving



TOP RIGHT: Intense action and stunning visuals made *Crysis* an unforgettable experience for PC gamers especially.

BELOW: The back end of *Crysis* moves away from jungle environs, arguably to the game's detriment.





YERLI RECALLS RECEIVING NEWS OF PC GAMER US EDITION'S CRYISIS REVIEW: 98 OUT OF 100

CRYISIS CHRONOLOGY

The series' story so far



CRYISIS 2007

The original and, most would agree, best *Crysis* game.



CRYISIS 2 2011

Crysis 2 lacked breadth in its levels, but its depiction of New York was super.



CRYISIS 4 UNKNOWN

After a decade-long hiatus, Crytek is working on a new entry in the series.



FAR CRY 2004

Technically not a *Crysis* game, but the series wouldn't exist without it.



CRYISIS: WARHEAD 2008

Crysis' excellent standalone expansion pack.



CRYISIS 3 2013

Crysis 3 felt a lot like *Crysis 2* but with a bow. Kind of like an expansion pack.

news of PC Gamer's US edition review. "Rob Letts, the executive producer from EA, calls me up and says, 'Are you sitting?' I literally was sitting, in the bathroom. 'Can we talk later?' I said. 'No, I have to tell you now'. I said 'I'm in the bathroom'. And he said 'Oh. But you're sitting?'"

Undeterred, Letts relayed the review score, which was 98 out of 100. However, the phone cut out after the 9, so Yerli thought the score was 90. Later, Letts emailed Yerli the PDF of the review. "I will never forget that moment," Yerli says. "I called him up and I said, 'Hey, you told me 90. Are you kidding me? Is this real?'"

The reviews for *Crysis* were generally very positive, but trouble was brewing among broader fans, with reports that many players were struggling to run the game, ultimately leading to the famous meme 'Can it run *Crysis*?' According to Yerli, the performance debacle stemmed from a misunderstanding about what the graphics settings of *Crysis* were designed to do. "I want[ed] to make sure *Crysis* does not age, that [it] is future proofed, meaning that if I played it three years from now, it should look better than today." In other words, Yerli claims the higher-end settings of *Crysis* were designed for PCs years in the future. "[But] a lot of people tried to maximise *Crysis* immediately," he says. "And I'm like, 'Oh, that's not why we built the Ultra mode, or Very High!'"

This may be true. It may also be convenient historical revisionism. But either way, the 'Can it run *Crysis*?' meme proved more of a benefit to the game's reputation than a detraction, cementing it in the PC gaming hall of fame. "It was this ambivalent kind of meme that was good and bad, but I actually enjoyed it," Yerli says. "Last year, Jensen [Huang] for Nvidia announced a new GPU, and they said, 'Yes, and it can run *Crysis*.'"

It's also true that, deliberate or not, *Crysis*' whopping technical demands did effectively future-proof it. Although the game received a remaster in 2021, the original version still looks almost as good as it did in 2007.

"*Crysis* had achieved the goal to be better than *Far Cry*, more impactful than *Far Cry*. But I also knew that after this one, it's going to be hard to impact, like repeat the day like this," Yerli says. He was right. *Crysis 2*, although a better game than it is often given credit for, undeniably suffered from its more restricted linear design. *Crysis 3* meanwhile was fine, but fairly forgettable. But all three games leave a legacy in their formidable engine, which alongside Crytek's own games has powered titles like *Prey*, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and is the basis for *Star Citizen*'s Star Engine. "I know for a fact, for Crytek today, still today, *Crysis* is the most important title ever launched. And for me personally, it is the same," Yerli concludes. ■

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
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Broken beauty

I have fond memories of playing the original *STALKER* back in 2007. It did something that no other first-person action game did at the time: elevating the act of simply surviving in its grim but strangely beautiful dystopian world into a key part of its immersion and fun. At times, *STALKER* was truly gripping entertainment. Unfortunately, *STALKER* was as broken as it was beautiful, and it took years of patches before it offered an experience largely devoid of killer bugs and jank.

Fast-forward to 2025, and GSC Game World's long-in-the-making sequel, *STALKER 2: Heart of Chernobyl*, is here and, for both good and bad, this is a true successor, offering stunningly immersive survival horror and uberjank in equal measure. In six months it'll be incredible.

R. Jones

ROBERT JONES

PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's irradiated reviewers...



JOSH WOLLENS
Specialist in
Drinking vodka

Currently playing
STALKER 2: Heart of Chernobyl

This month
Started selling glowing anomalies in the PCG Towers' basement.



TED LITCHFIELD
Specialist in
Cracking whips

Currently playing
Indiana Jones and the Great Circle

This month
Whipped gamepads out of console gamer hands. A true hero.



ROBIN VALENTINE
Specialist in
Hijacking bodies

Currently playing
Slitterhead

This month
Soul-jacked Beryl at a branch of Greggs. Got her to hand out free Festive Bakes.



LEN HAFER
Specialist in
Flying planes

Currently playing
Microsoft Flight Simulator 2024

This month
Flew from Bristol to Timbuktu on a whim. And in *MFS24* she...



JON BOLDING
Specialist in
Building colonies

Currently playing
Empire of the Ants

This month
Amassed a massive mound of soil in his back garden. He lives under it now.



IN THE ZONE

STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL is beautiful, brilliant, but a bit busted

By Joshua Wolens

I admit it: I was scared. The gleaming trailers, the Microsoft showcases, the Unreal Engine 5 – *STALKER 2*'s marketing didn't look like any *STALKER* I've known and loved. Had GSC Game World traded in all the series' beloved jank in pursuit of streamlined console success? Had it made *Metro* by another name? Well, never trust a trailer.

It might be shinier and it might have gamepad support, but *STALKER 2* is still *STALKER* down to its bones, that unique and unreplicable mixture of FPS, survival horror and immersive sim.

Whether X-Ray or UE5, the game's ambition still strains against the seams of its engine. It's still filled with systems – factions, artefacts, anomalies, a world filled with people going about their business and the staccato thuk-thuk of Eastern Bloc weaponry – that at times push the whole thing to breaking point and beyond it.

It's excellent, and undoubtedly my personal game of the year, but here comes the caveat. I meant what I said: *STALKER 2* is *STALKER* to the bone, and that means the bad stuff too. There were errors, crashes, progress-halting bugs and at-times hilarious glitches in animation and AI, plus minor stuttering that I just came to accept as the price of admission, even at 1440p on my 3700X, RTX 4080, and 32GB RAM-equipped machine. And though a meaty day-one patch has helped a lot, the game still feels rickety: a bit stuttery, with AI that still sometimes fails to distinguish between friend and foe, and so on.

Lord knows I can't fault the devs – that the game exists at all despite its home country being invaded partway through development is a miracle – but it does mean the whole thing feels like it hasn't quite set just yet. Do I love *STALKER 2*? Yes. Does *STALKER 2* make itself easy to love? No. Or at least, not

without the patches that GSC promises are in the pipeline.

FIRE AND FORGET

You don't play anyone familiar in *STALKER 2* (which is actually the fourth in the series, if you're new to the Zone). You're Skif, an ex-military type from the Mainland – the relatively normal Ukraine outside of Chornobyl – who awoke in the night to find his kitchen rudely

annihilated by an artefact, one of the many priceless, semi-magical treasures that the Zone produces as a matter of course, and which make

The game's ambition still strains against the seams of its engine

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A big wide systemic FPS sandbox set in the Chornobyl exclusion zone

EXPECT TO PAY

£50

DEVELOPER

GSC Game World

PUBLISHER

GSC Game World

REVIEWED ON

AMD Ryzen 7 3700X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER

Yes (but not at launch)

LINK

stalker2.com

it catnip to fortune-seekers. Down one apartment and rather annoyed about the whole thing, Skif ventures into the Zone to figure out just what the hell an artefact thinks it's doing spawning in his flat, and soon finds himself entangled in a multi-layered plot pileup of factional warfare, personal vendettas, competing ideological visions and sporadic gangland violence, with plenty of choices for you to make about who to side with along the way.

STALKER has always, quietly, had one of the stranger and more philosophical stories in the videogame narrative pantheon, and boy does *STALKER 2* make good on that legacy. It doesn't so much have a plot as it has a series of small ones in sequence that all eventually add up, each taking you to some new part of the astonishingly massive Zone map, which encompasses, so far as I can tell, every location featured in previous games and then some, and which looks more beautiful than ever with all the whizzbang bells and whistles of 2024. Never before have videogames let us descend into cursed basements with lighting so atmospheric or so eerie.

Exploration feels never-ending, as do the two-kilometre sprints every time the game sets down a new quest marker that seems almost spitefully far away (fast travel requires you to speak to paid guides in population hubs, and they only go to other hubs). Ah well, you'll probably pick up some neat artefacts on the trip.

I enjoyed the tales-within-a-tale structure, for the most part, but it does have the discombobulating effect of making you feel multiple times like you are approaching the final showdown, the great denouement, the climax of climaxes, only for the game to turn around and pretty much say 'and now, the rest of the story. Please turn your cassette to side B'. Its pacing gets fatiguing, particularly as you get into the true

RELICS AND ARTEFACTS

Some of the Zone's many rare treasures



WEIRD BALL

Protects against bullets. Shame you have to risk life and limb against a gravity trap to get it.



SPRING

Lets you carry more stuff. Which, might even be more useful than surviving bullet wounds.



JELLYFISH

Offers a little protection against physical damage, but also lightly irradiates you.



CRYSTAL

Protects you from fire, which you encounter a lot. Smokey Bear hasn't made it to Ukraine.



WHIRLWIND

Keeps you running for longer, which is handy when *STALKER 2* asks you to sprint a few miles.



RAT KING

Stops you bleeding and protects against electric shocks. Equip this the next time you build a PC.

Maybe he wants to be friends.



Pictured: science.



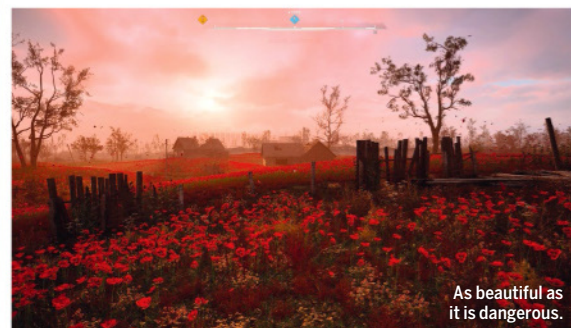
LEFT: Emissions are more destructive and scarier than ever.

BELOW: You'll deal with a lot of factions. They all hate each other.





Could this be less ominous?



As beautiful as it is dangerous.

RIGHT: It's how he would've wanted to go.

BELOW: He's as surprised as I was.



45 / 187

endgame but things still continue to go on. And on. And on.

A WORLD AT WAR

But you don't really come to a *STALKER* game for its story. You come for its stories: the bizarre anecdotes that the game's systems and A-Life AI can't help but spit out, and *STALKER 2* has those in spades. This is a bonafide clockwork world, and its NPCs – who to this day retain their utterly charming progen names like Gena Badass, Vanya Ampoule, Max Sleepy and so on – are just as much subject and victim to its whims as you are.

Take, for instance, the military checkpoint that solved itself. Sprinting to a quest marker, I ran into a roadblock set up by the bullying, military Ward faction. I was not on good terms with the Ward. The main plot had given me multiple opportunities to side with them and I responded to every single one with gunfire, so the troops weren't keen on letting me pass.

A conundrum. I stood, brow furrowed, rain pattering on my hardened military exoskeleton, pondering how best to resolve the situation. I could open fire, I could sneak through, I could search for some other means of ingress.

Or I could count on the enormous pack of feral dogs that descended out of the darkness to lay total waste to the camp. *STALKER 2*'s stars had aligned in such a way that these dogs,

on their travels, happened to walk right into the checkpoint I needed to get through. Like a plague sent by God, they devoured every troop in there, taking heavy casualties themselves as the panicked soldiers let rip a hail of gunfire that turned night into day. After 15 seconds my problems were a dim memory. I

put down the few remaining pups and carried on.

This, to me, is *STALKER*'s soul, and it burns bright in *STALKER 2*. It's not just the checkpoint dogs, it's the quasi-bossfight with a big

scary mutant that got cut short before I even breached the basement he was hiding in, because he'd gotten caught in a burner anomaly and died. It's watching two hostile factions destroy each other in a woodland skirmish before you pick off whoever remains for the loot. It's being pursued across the map by a faction you've tanked your rep with by, uh, picking off its members in the aftermath of a woodland skirmish. It's a world that obeys its own rules without favour or bias: action meets consequence meets action, on and on and on.

But it's also here, in the knotty systemic stuff like the faction system, that some of the worst bugs reared their head for me. Although I went to great lengths – including multiple extended bouts of mass murder – to communicate my dislike for the Ward, the game never quite processed that I had completely severed ties with them.

One of their main quests, loose

and orphaned, appeared in my log and sat there abandoned right up to the ending. This confused things multiple times when I had an objective along the lines of 'kill all these Ward guys'. The enemies wouldn't attack, and when I had finished the slightly disconcerting task of euthanising my foes like cows, the quest log wouldn't update, leaving me stranded. To be fair, GSC's day-one patch mostly fixed this. The quest was updated even if the Ward still refused to treat me like an enemy. That's not exactly a clean bill of health, though.

ROUGH WITH THE SMOOTH

But as a *STALKER* die-hard even the bugs feel a bit like an old friend. It's these idiosyncrasies – the quirky, unforgiving, systems-driven game design and, yes, even the jank, that I worried GSC might be tempted to sacrifice in the leap to whatever AAA means.

More fool me. The devs have been resolute in refusing to sand down any of the series' rough edges for a new audience of potentially more casual players. *STALKER 2* does not hold your hand and the Zone does not care about you. This is a game where the first mutant you fight is completely invisible, and that won't hesitate to chuck its strongest enemies at you if you happen to make a wrong turn early on. Even if you escape, you spent precious resources on staying alive and your equipment probably got chewed up in the tussle; they'll get you next time.

It's almost uncanny to play something with such unsentimental, old-school design sensibilities that looks as good and feels as modern as *STALKER 2* does, and it's a welcome return for one of PC gaming's greatest and most eccentric series. Yes, there are bugs aplenty, so maybe give it a little while before you dive in, and yes, the abrasive mechanics might put some people off. But it's great to be back in the Zone after over a decade away, and to find that it hasn't sacrificed the things that made it so special all those years ago. ■

Like a plague sent by God, they devoured every troop in there

ZONE CUISINE

The food and drink in Chernobyl is to die for



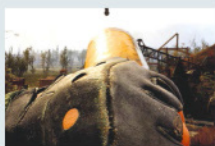
MEAT CHUNKS
Can't beat a tin of indistinct chunks. What are they? How old are they? Who knows?



CONDENSED MILK
This'll replenish hunger and isn't likely to contain bits of the last guy you offed.



VODKA
Nothing beats radiation like a swig of vodka, just like real life! (Don't try this at home.)



BEER
If you can't find any vodka, I guess beer will have to do. It almost feels like a betrayal.



PC GAMER

VERDICT

Performance issues and bugs don't stop *STALKER*'s mad, wonderful heart from shining through.

83

SLUGFEST

METAL SLUG TACTICS makes turn-based run-and-gun work with style... most of the time

By Dominic Tarason

In the entire history of videogames, there have only been a few recorded cases of a studio performing the forbidden alchemy of transposing a game into another genre entirely. Until now, the most successful was probably *R-Type Tactics* (originally for the humble PSP, and now being remade), but I think the crown might have to go to *Metal Slug Tactics*, which cribs some structural notes from *Into The Breach*...

Pick three characters, tackle quick turn-based tactical battles on small, hand-crafted maps where you have the information advantage. Gain temporary power and resources over an individual run, unlock new starting options, difficulties and fun wrinkles over time. But the meat of the combat is far wilder and scrappier.

This is pure *Metal Slug* running and gunning. Mission objectives lean towards fast action, throwing your soldiers into a swarm of enemies with objectives like 'pick off three targets', 'get two characters to a location' or just 'survive for four turns', with bonuses rewarding speed. With small battlefields and bad guys capable of killing your soldiers in just a couple hits, running away isn't an option.

Paradoxically, risk is safety, speed is life, and the further a character moves in a turn the less damage they take. Sprint as far as you can, and they become functionally invulnerable, cheekily pirouetting through the air as enemies attack.

The potential to become unkillable made wacky cartoon tactics not just viable but incredibly tempting. With fast enough movement I delighted in letting my enemies blow themselves to bits trying to hit the invulnerable lunatic that just bounced into the middle of their formation.

Sometimes it's worth just taking a hit – everyone's revived and healed after each fight, but screwing up isn't so bad. You've got a pool of revives that let you respawn straight back

into the fight, encouraging risk-taking. This feeds back into the run-and-gun pacing: wiping out enemies fast enough to complete bonus objectives requires stacking up your squad in complex arrangements to trigger Sync attacks.

Sync attacks are the game's secret sauce. So long as a character is within range to use their unlimited-ammo 'light' weapon, they'll join in free with any

ally they see take a shot. Takes risky positioning, but do it right and your characters get three attacks each per turn and the enemies fall like

The further a character moves in a turn the less damage they take

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A turn-based roguelike-ish adaptation of the arcade classic

EXPECT TO PAY
£21

DEVELOPER
Leikir Studio

PUBLISHER
Dotemu

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900k,
64GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
metalslugtactics.com

dominoes. Gratifying, but thanks to the short missions and runs, wiping out never felt too frustrating.

There's just so much to like here mechanically. Each zone has fun environmental quirks, mummies in the desert that spread their curse by touch. Bosses are high-agility fights of attrition, as your squad dodge big AoEs while trying to outpace a screen-filling mechanical monster on damage, and guest characters Ralf, Clark and Leona showcase their fighting game moves with some stylish tag-team combos.

Aesthetically it's pure *Metal Slug*. *Tactics* takes a serious shot at recapturing SNK's peerless sprites from its isometric perspective. While not quite as smoothly shaded, everything is detailed, colourful and clear, with the lively pixel soldiers bouncing and wiggling.

SHELL-SHOCKED

If only each run didn't turn up another minor bug. Sometimes amusing and cosmetic and other times more frustrating: a clearly open tile inaccessible for no discernible reason, or only available once my squad blocked off all alternate routes, indicating some pathing wackiness.

Sometimes it's not entirely clear which isometric tiles share planes or lines of sight either. Nothing game-breaking or impossible to work around, but these issues cropped up frequently enough to the sheen.

These issues could be patched up by the time you read this, but unless you're ready to catch a little flak, check the patch notes. Bugs aside, *Metal Slug Tactics* has been a great surprise. Win or lose, it's hard to resist the air-raid siren call of just one more go through Morden's army. ■

TOUR OF DUTY

Four battlefields of *Metal Slug Tactics*



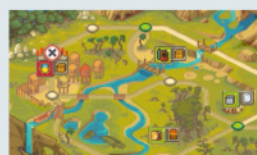
ARGUN PALM DESERT

The first unlocked and simplest, with a mix of basic ranged and sword enemies.



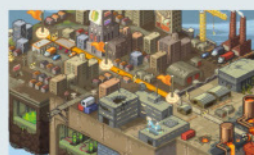
HERKANET TOMBS

Full of sarcophagi packed with undead. Get hit by a mummy and you become one for a turn.



SOURSOP JUNGLE

Overgrown and lush, home to tough, melee-heavy jungle cultists and high ziggurats.



SIROCCO CITY

High military enemy density, including nasty shield guys that protect other bad guys.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A smart adaptation that beats the odds to capture *Metal Slug*'s spirit in another genre, with a few irritating bugs.

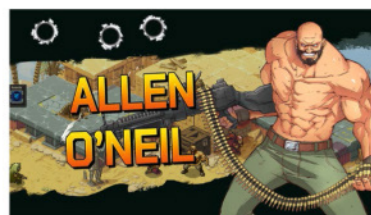
76

Bosses are big, impressive, and introduced with fun little cutscenes.



FAR LEFT: Run, jump and bounce across the map like this and bullets will never hurt you.

LEFT: Between runs, your squad get into some surprisingly serious discussions.



BELOW: The explosion sprites are every bit as spectacular as they should be.



A RESTLESS DREAM

SILENT HILL 2's remake shines and stumbles in equal measure

By Kerry Brunskill

I don't envy Bloober Team. Nobody actually wants the difficult task of updating something as nuanced, emotionally sensitive and revered as *Silent Hill 2*. The original has been praised for decades, and picked apart by fans eager to understand every last detail for just as long. It's a game where every strange texture and odd room decoration means something, the game's unforgettable atmosphere held together by the finest of threads.

This modern remake of that legendary tale gets off to a great start, offering an extensive range of graphical settings and accessibility options. It doesn't take long to tweak the game into a smoothly running ray-traced beauty, or to adjust the controls and their behaviour so they're just the way I like them. A personal favourite is the option to swap the standard 'mash to get monsters off me' action for a simple button hold instead – a small gesture that allowed me to concentrate on the horrors around me instead of being distracted by an aching thumb.

WE COM!

Those horrors look impressively familiar, even decades removed from the game's PlayStation 2 debut. The rust-covered hellscapes, the signage,

the glistening sacks of flesh scuttling past locked-up homes tumbling into the abyss – it's easy to believe *Silent Hill 2* always looked this good, but that illusion takes a lot of hard work.

It doesn't take long to tweak the game into a smoothly running beauty

The remake's treatment of the series' signature fog is just as remarkable. It seems to roll over the scenery, pool in dirty corners, and settle on the ground. It's a choking physical presence that can move and change

intensity, something protagonist James Sunderland has to force himself through, rather than a cloudy overlay trying to obscure my view.

In spite of the upgraded fog, *Silent Hill 2* is easier to navigate than ever before, with James' traumatic stroll around town assisted by the returning auto-annotated map – its scribbled notes and eye catching circles around key features still the

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A remake of a horror legend with a few surprises of its own

EXPECT TO PAY

£60

DEVELOPER

Bloober Team SA

PUBLISHER

Konami

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i9-13900HX, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

konami.com/games/silenthill/2r/en/

best in the genre – and a new visual aid: white cloth. This more subtle take on modern gaming's yellow paint can be found draped over vaultable bits of scenery or wrapped around objects James can interact with, helping to cut through the visual noise that naturally occurs in cluttered, high-detail environments like the ones found here. Once I learned to look out for these visual tells, even working my way through the dark nightmares of the Otherworld while being chased by monsters seemed easy.

SHATTERED MEMORIES

And it's a good thing, too, because while the story's general structure is the same as before, the maps for each major location have been completely redesigned. All of the key features are still in there, somewhere – a doctor's office, an ornate clock, gallows in the middle of an unnervingly large area – but appropriately it plays like a hazy recollection of the original, with snatches of the familiar transformed into something new and different. Much like being trapped in a nightmare, it's a collision of the familiar and unfamiliar, leading you down paths you think you know, only for you to become totally lost.

Some of these curveballs come from the game's mix of new and redesigned riddles. The standard difficulty is pitched just right, giving me something flavourful and satisfying to solve without needing to be tracked in a notebook. Sadly, the new physical puzzles are less successful, too often involving pushing a box from one place to another, and the chance to update or omit a few of the original's less exciting challenges wasn't taken.

Many of the better puzzles that didn't make the cut have been transformed into non-interactive echoes of the past. Newcomers will no doubt wonder why anyone would leave a horseshoe covered in wax lying around, but returning fans will

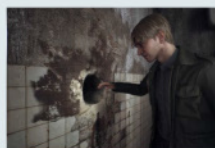
HOLE-Y HELL

James put his what in where?



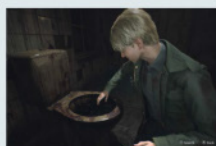
GONE HOLE

It all begins with a gentle warm-up. Not even a hole, but a reminder of a non-hole.



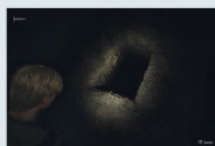
WALL HOLE

James' first real hole is dark and dirty, but lacking the filth and fluids of later examples.



TOILET HOLE

It should be a hole, but it's blocked now. Doesn't stop James reaching in. But it should.



HUMAN HOLE

It's got his name on it and everything. It was made for him. Not six feet deep.





James: 'I shouldn't have come here.'

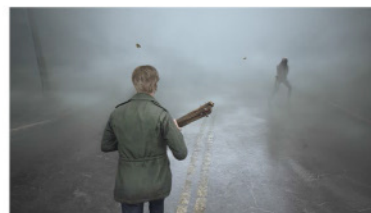


Cutscenes often try to recreate the look of the original.



ABOVE: A lot of old puzzles return with fun new twists.

LEFT: James' map scribbles are as helpful as ever



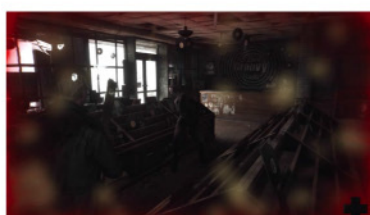
It's nice to feel welcome in a new town.



Rust, blood, and wires give Otherworld an unsettling look.



RIGHT: Enemy damage and grim fluids can obscure the view.



FAR RIGHT: Combat now uses an over-the-shoulder action cam.



6 | 59

Walking home with a traffic cone on your head is key part of a university education.



4 | 29

immediately understand the reference. These optional discoveries silently seem to imply that James' 2024 adventure is just the latest loop in an endless nightmare, but they also serve as an awkward reminder that I'm playing another developer's take on *Silent Hill 2*, rather than the original team's.

MONSTER MASH

As clever and restrained as *Silent Hill 2* can be, sometimes its horrors take on more monstrous forms, writhing in corridors and spitting... I don't even want to wonder what fluid these tied-up sacks of flesh spit, really. Even on the default combat difficulty setting, and with decades of experience with the original game under my belt, these beings are still vicious.

Close range combat is scrappy and frantic. Technically, it's also very simplistic – just keep smashing the attack button until they fall over – but when we're talking about a desperate man trying to fight off unknowable, hideous entities with whatever he has to hand, an elegant, complex system doesn't necessarily sound like a good fit. Basic, violent clobbering makes a lot more sense. It also has diminishing returns.

It was great, for about an hour. And then the monsters kept coming. And coming. And coming. *Silent Hill 2* mistakenly believes that being assaulted by two pairs of legs fused together at the waist is the most exciting thing that could happen to

anyone, and forces 'surprise' encounters with these monsters far too often, failing to maintain the horror. Before long, I stopped being afraid and just became bored.

Silent Hill 2 always set itself apart from its competitors by being a deep, thoughtful horror game. The original wanted me to take my time, to

imagine something awful lurking just out of sight in the fog. The remake seems to think I have no imagination at all, that only monsters are scary (and only if I can see them), and if it doesn't keep up its high MPM

(Monsters Per Minute) then it's not frightening me enough.

It was great, for about an hour. And then the monsters kept coming

SWING AND MISS

The remake takes this train of thought so far that a few sections forced me to shoot my way through arena-like monster clearouts, which only served to highlight how unsuited *Silent Hill 2*'s protagonist is for all-out combat. The new dodge action did little to help and the game's over-reliance on it reduces these violent fragments of James' broken psyche to plain old monsters. He is by design an ordinary guy in an extraordinary situation, not Chris Redfield, and he shouldn't have to act like a discount version of Capcom's beefy boulder-punching hero to survive his own story.

This misjudged focus on combat has also worked its way into the game's boss battles, too. These fights were never a highlight in the original

but did at least serve the story well – and they tended to be over before any serious grumbles started to form. The remake correctly identifies these segments as a weakness, but then 'fixes' them by making them much longer, with a few even going through patience-testing multi-phase, multi-location, changes in the process. If there's one part where this remake completely misunderstands the original game, it's here. Angela in particular deserves better, the twisted domesticity of her old-themed boss battle transformed into a bombastic mano-a-mano between James and the Abstract Daddy that takes the focus away from the only person who mattered in this scene.

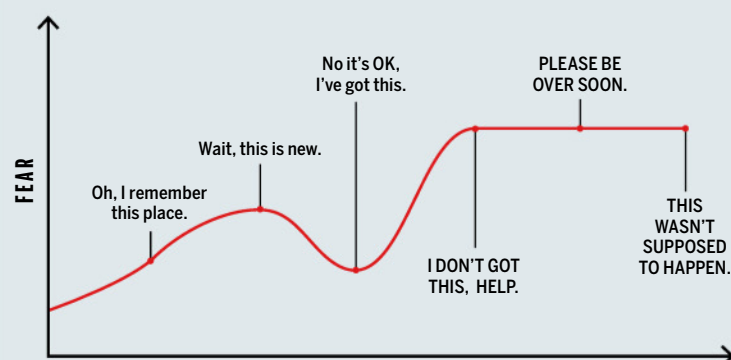
In many places Bloober Team has seized the opportunity to offer a fresh twist on a true classic, and pulled it off perfectly. I enjoy listening to Akira Yamaoka's new arrangements of his old soundtrack. I love being able to quickly brush James up against a door to see if it's locked instead of making him manually rattle a corridor's worth of handles. I'm thrilled just to be back here, to have an excuse to play some version of this amazing story again.

But the stumbles can't be ignored, and at times even manage to display a worrying lack of understanding of the source material. A few key cutscenes, the sort that sent shivers up my spine on far weaker hardware, fall flat in their modern forms. Mystery and suspense is too often replaced with unnecessary close-up reaction shots and another bunch of leggy monsters in the shadows, as if someone was concerned that the one game that can definitively prove it's adored for being a subtle, understated, psychological experience might be called boring instead of brave.

When it's good it's excellent: any game that hews as closely as this one does to something with *Silent Hill 2*'s high standards can go toe to toe with any other modern horror game. But it relies too much on its repetitive, violent encounters, and I just wish it had been a little more careful to capture the spirit, as well as the look, of the original. ■

THIS IS FINE

Honestly, I've been here before



PC GAMER VERDICT

Bloober Team's take on Konami's *Silent Hill 2* is a fun but flawed take on a flawless gem.

78

JET STREAM

MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2024 goes higher, further, and faster

By Len Hafer

Presenting the entire Earth in even greater fidelity than its 2020 predecessor, it's hard to overstate what a remarkable technical accomplishment *Microsoft Flight Simulator 2024* represents. The aircraft and cockpits are astoundingly detailed, both visually and in how they function. The physics of flight are delightfully authentic, and while it has its quirks, no one has ever even tried to include our entire planet in a game with such fine-grain detail.

Before we get ahead of ourselves, I want to acknowledge the horrendous state of the servers at launch that prevented me and many others from even being able to play at all. These have been, at least for me, almost entirely resolved as of the writing of this, though I still do run into occasional issues like the fact that I can never seem to get all of the high-res geometry in the Grand Canyon to load. It was not an acceptable launch day experience, by any means. But I have seen no indication in my testing that you will have that bad of an experience today, so I'm willing to let the past be the past.

It is worth noting, though, that due to the streaming nature of modern *Flight Simulator*, you will

have a variable experience depending on your network set-up. I'm lucky enough to be soaring on gigabit wired ethernet, and allocated 200GB on a fresh SSD to *FS2024*'s 'rolling cache' that stores things like terrain data for frequently-visited locations. The load

times, especially for a first-time launch, are much better than they were in *FS2020*, but Microsoft does recommend at least 100Mbps of bandwidth for playing on max settings. I haven't needed that much

– the most I've seen *FS2024* use at any given time is around 46Mbps. But it's something to be aware of.

I was cruising in and out of gorgeous volumetric clouds

YOU ARE A PILOT

Microsoft has identified three types of players *Flight Simulator* aims to

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The latest in virtual aviation that includes the highest-fidelity recreation of our planet in any videogame to date

EXPECT TO PAY
£70

DEVELOPER
Asobo Studio

PUBLISHER
Microsoft

REVIEWED ON
Ryzen 7 3700X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2070 Super, Logitech Extreme 3D Pro

MULTIPLAYER
Leaderboards

LINK
flightsimulator.com/microsoft-flight-simulator-2024/

cater to: hardcore simmers who want the most realistic experience, gamers who want to earn rewards for completing challenges, and sightseers who want to visit cool world landmarks. I like to think I have a little bit of all three wolves inside of me. I appreciate a lot of the little touches of realism, I'm a geography and architecture nerd who is easily delighted by things like being able to fly under a faithful recreation of the Golden Gate Bridge, and I sure do like it when number goes up.

While I'd say the simmers and sight-seers are well served, *FS2024*'s attempt at a goal-driven career mode is a little bit underwhelming. I did enjoy practising and taking exams to earn new certifications for stuff like IFR flight and jet aircraft, but the actual economics of being a freelance pilot are shallow and not that interesting to manage. It takes many, many hours of mercenary work on borrowed wings, handing over most of your pay in finder's fees, before you can even afford to own the cheapest plane available. And while the mission variety – from dropping off skydivers at 10,000 feet to helping put out forest fires – is enough to



RIGHT: Fun fact: this plane is actually cheaper to buy than most apartments in San Francisco.





TOP: I'm about to do something either very cool or very expensive.

keep things interesting, I never got the feeling of running a small business that I was looking for.

BLUE YONDER

It hardly mattered when I was cruising in and out of gorgeous volumetric clouds or diving down almost low enough to dip my toes in the sparkling Nile, however. *FS2024* truly looks incredible. At least from 1,000 feet up, or when you're admiring the many bespoke airports and landmarks – both new and returning from *FS2020* – it's probably one of the best-looking games I've ever played. Beyond the bounds that human artists have touched up, though, it handles certain things better than others at eye-level.

I know, I know. This isn't *Microsoft Walking Simulator 2024*. But if you give me the option to exit my aircraft and trudge around with a



SEE THE SIGHTS *Some of the most stunning, handcrafted locales to visit*



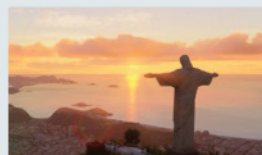
GIBRALTAR

The most stunning flight I've taken, circling the Pillars of Hercules and crossing the strait.



MONUMENT VALLEY

These rock formations rising out of the desert of Arizona make you feel like you're on another planet.



RIO DE JANEIRO

An awe-inspiring modern city with a striking skyline, nestled against dramatic natural geography.



EDINBURGH

You can cruise over the imposing castle and along the rugged Scottish coastline.



custom avatar, of course I'm going to put it through its paces. And what I found was a startling level of believability across a multitude of distinct biomes... as long as you stick to rural or wilderness, inland areas. Walking through the wooded hills around Divide, CO, that I spent a lot of my childhood in was almost eerie in how faithful it felt.

But if you get to more populated areas, things get surreal and bizarre pretty quick. Don't expect to be able to walk around the streets of Tokyo without wondering if your graphics card is malfunctioning or you're maybe having a bad trip. This engine also still can't handle places where land and water meet that well, which is unfortunate if you want to take a cruise up the Pacific Coast or around the fjords of Norway. Waves often look painted on and unmoving, and river banks frequently defy gravity in wacky ways. It's still impressive. I mean, it's modelled the whole Earth! But these details stick out more because of how unbelievable a recreation it is otherwise.

TOP: The end of Europe, and maybe my graphics card.

FAR LEFT: If I'm gonna crash, I'm at least going to look absolutely sick doing it.

CAREER MODE BENCHMARKS

The path to becoming a commercial pilot



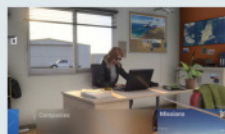
ACQUIRE YOUR PPL: PERSONAL PILOT'S LICENCE

This will unlock one mission type, but won't allow you to fly commercially. So you're just getting experience, not money, basically.



ACQUIRE YOUR CPL: COMMERCIAL PILOT'S LICENCE

This is a harder test, which will unlock the ability to make money as well as new mission types. At this point, you're still flying borrowed planes.



BUY YOUR OWN PLANE!

There's a greyed-out Companies button on the career screen, and MSFS2024 won't actually tell you what it does until you have enough money to purchase your own aircraft.

DIFFERENT YOKES

Aside from a good internet connection and a good GPU, the remaining entry cost to have an ideal experience with FS2024 is some kind of a dedicated peripheral. You don't have to splurge on a full HOTAS if you don't want to – my trusty Logitech Extreme 3D Pro,

which will run you less than £50, served perfectly admirably with a keyboard beside it to give me access to more hotkeys. But I also tried to tough it out with an Xbox controller for about 12 hours, and I can only just barely recommend this experience if that's your only option. It's playable, but not having fine throttle control is a constant issue, and all of the control surfaces are really, really touchy with that tiny thumbstick. I definitely got cramps trying to hold the correct angle of attack for climbing, and I had to adjust the sensitivity per aircraft to not put myself into a death spin on every take-off and landing. I can't even imagine trying to play with a mouse and keyboard alone.

If you're less interested in the simulation aspects, there are a lot of options to tweak your flying experience. With all of the assists turned on, it can feel pretty arcadey, much too arcadey for my taste. On the other end of the spectrum, you can go through a pre-flight checklist and manually flip every switch in the cockpit before takeoff, and the air traffic control system is much more detailed than *FS2020*. You're still going to hear a lot of uncanny AI voices, which I don't love. But given the number of missions and different airports, it's not like they could have recorded human dialogue for all of it.

FINAL DESTINATIONS

The variety of aircraft, with 70 even in just the base edition, is also pretty incredible – with everything from commercial airliners to fighter jets to hot air balloons. Each has its own distinct quirks and handling challenges to learn, which makes each excursion in a new vehicle feel almost like getting to know a new person. Helicopters and I never quite saw eye-to-eye, but I'm particularly partial to the rugged 'taildragger' bush planes that let me take off and land quickly in the middle of some random field in Africa.

And many of these wild areas are now populated by migrating local wildlife, too, with the highly-detailed and excellently-animated models borrowed from Frontier's *Planet Zoo*. They don't have a wide variety of behaviours, unfortunately. You can walk right up to a polar bear or a water buffalo

and they really won't even acknowledge your existence. But it's a cool little touch, and yet another excuse to use the full-featured photo functions. There's even a new World Photographer mode that challenges you to snap pics of various animals and landmarks, which I found to be a relaxing break from career mode.

If you want to really put your piloting skills to the test, there's also a selection of challenges with weekly leaderboards, ranging from perfecting difficult landings to doing what I can only describe as 'some Top Gun shit',

There's also a selection of challenges with weekly leaderboards

trying to fly through locales like the Grand Canyon in an F/A-18 while maintaining as low an altitude as possible. These are neat, but definitely a lot more stressful than the other modes as well.

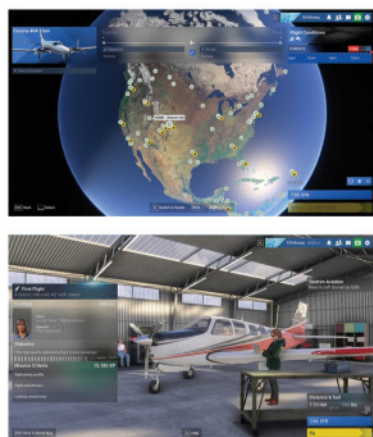
And this sim is also not without some quirks, glitches and oversights. One issue I ran into multiple times was at some of the smaller, procedurally-generated airports you might fly out of for certain missions, where my plane would spawn with one wing partially stuck inside of a structure, making it impossible to take off. Other times, I'd get dinged for infractions like using my flaps at too high of a speed when my plane was standing completely still with the parking brake on. These issues tend to be small, infrequent and with an easy workaround of simply picking a different mission. But they are still annoying.

None of that gets in the way of what *Flight Simulator 2024* represents in its entirety, though. It takes the mind-boggling ambition of the 2020 sim and executes on it even better – launch woes notwithstanding – which is already a massive accomplishment. Some of the new things it tries to do work better than others, but the core of what makes this long-running franchise great is stronger than ever. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Microsoft Flight Simulator 2024 fulfils the promise of being the most true-to-life and detailed game of its kind.

90



TOP: A job's a job.



CIRCULAR LOGIC

INDIANA JONES AND THE GREAT CIRCLE is a winner

By Ted Litchfield

I wasn't over the moon about the prospect of a triple-A Indiana Jones game before starting *The Great Circle*. A new MachineGames joint, now that's something I'd hang my hat on, but Dr Jones? How many stories could there be left to tell about the Connecticut-based archeologist named after Illinois' weird little neighbour? It turns out he had at least one fantastic videogame left in the tank – MachineGames' finest to date.

The pairing made sense on paper: the neo-*Wolfenstein* games were pulpy adventures with tons of heart where an all-American protagonist gave those Nazis what-for. But I didn't feel it until Indy donned a Catholic priest's vestments to go undercover in a fascist-occupied Vatican – a miniature open world that I can only compare to the best hubs of the *Deus Ex* series. The combat, stealth and puzzles are all simple but fun enough (maybe not the stealth – more on that later), but paired with *The Great Circle*'s phenomenal levels and nailing of what makes Jones such an iconic character, the result is a *Batman Arkham* tier of 'who knew a licensed game about this guy could actually be this good?'

The combat, stealth and puzzles are all simple but fun enough

CROUCH WALKING

Rather than the dual-wielding ultraviolence of *Wolfenstein*, *The Great Circle* is all about more brand-appropriate stealth, hand-to-hand brawling, exploration and puzzle solving. There are guns, but limited ammo makes them more situational tools – I only ever used Indy's trusty revolver to help take down a particularly meddlesome boss. This game can be a bit wonky, but the overall experience, the immersion, atmosphere and sense of fun are greater than the sum of its parts, with the magic and believability of MachineGames' vision of the 1930s and *The Great Circle*'s fantastic storytelling carrying the day. I'm reminded of how the

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A first-person, globe-trotting adventure starring everyone's favourite archeologist

EXPECT TO PAY
£60

DEVELOPER
MachineGames

PUBLISHER
Bethesda

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5 12600K,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3070

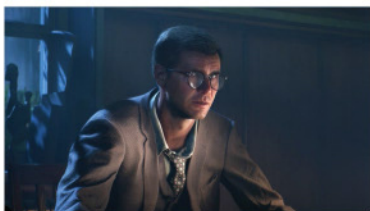
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
indianajones.bethesda.net

Elder Scrolls games have bad stealth, bad combat, samey dungeons and uneven skill systems, but they sell a fictional world so well, so completely, they're still some of the best RPGs.

The Great Circle has simple, line-of-sight stealth, without much in the way of sound propagation, visibility control (camouflage or light/shadow), silent ranged takedowns, or tools for keeping track of enemies (a tagging system or radar). None of that stuff is particularly Indiana Jones, but only one of *The Great Circle*'s stealth levels feels tailor-made to these limitations. A nighttime infiltration of Rome's Castel Sant'Angelo feels fit to task, with close quarters, limited numbers of guards and lots of alternate paths well out of their sightlines.

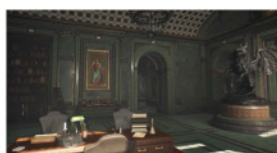
The other stealth sequences later are decidedly not that, with tons of enemies whose crisscrossing lines of sight preclude picking them off, while the levels lack reliable alternate paths around those guards. One main mission felt like a base lifted out of *Metal Gear Solid 5*, but with less than half of that game's information and tools. These sections sucked, and I found myself just zipping through



TOP: Deal me in, boys.



This pair is at the centre of some great quests.



them as quickly as possible, ignoring any side content and keeping my fingers crossed that none of the guards' "Hey, I see you!" meters would fill up completely as I passed.

GUY INCOGNITO

Thankfully there are only a few mandatory examples of these in the game, and stealth can be minimised through *The Great Circle's* disguise system. It's not *Hitman*, but it works well: each open world hub has two disguises, one you get at the beginning that allows access to most of the zone, and another, hidden costume that lets you walk freely in restricted areas.

It's as simple as the line of sight stealth, but it works much better: it freed me up to explore and soak up *The Great Circle's* environments without having to worry so much, while the remaining danger of being spotted by an officer adds just enough tension to keep things interesting. Story-wise, this setup results in a multitude of scenes as tense and memorable as *Wolfenstein's* train interrogation or *Venus* infiltration – one in particular that involved a fascist and a confession booth gave me a real belly laugh.

You've seen the brawling here before. You can punch and counter enemies, with a super-generous parry window meaning the fights are fun and easy without wearing out their welcome. On the second-hardest

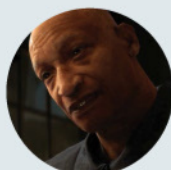
ABOVE: I'm going to decorate my house like this.

RIGHT: The attention to detail is superb, right down to Harrison Ford's chin scar.



SUPPORTING CAST

Some of the strange characters Indy meets along the way



LOCUS

An eight-foot-tall Vatican agent played by Tony Todd. Villain? Or just extreme?



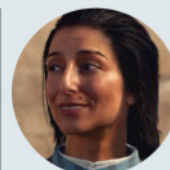
GINA

Our female lead, an antifascist reporter searching for her archeologist sister.



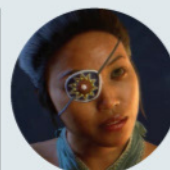
ANTONIO

A Catholic cardinal who loves books, jazz and helping Indy.



DAME NAWAL

A British Egyptologist and woman of means who has some history with Gina's sister.



PAILIN

A Thai guerrilla leader who aids Indy against the occupying fascists.

Indy goes undercover as Father Gallagher.



FAR LEFT: The tutorial is a recreation of Raiders' iconic opening.

difficulty, I only had real trouble with some optional boxing prizefights against The Fascist Heavyweight Champion of Italy and The Strongest Nazi Who Ever Lived – I kept getting up again and again for rematches like a brave glass jaw in an old cartoon, increasing Indy's risk of developing chronic traumatic encephalopathy.

In the great videogame scale of 'BioWare Tower of Hanoi puzzle' on the simple end to *Void Stranger* or 'Day one *Destiny* Raid' at most complex, *The Great Circle's* brain teasers are just barely upper middle class, like a notch above *Uncharted*. Something I really appreciated was just how many little puzzles there were – most sidequests involved puzzle solving or navigational challenges of some kind, and I had more fun with that than I would've with yet more base clearing or whatever else most open-worlders have us doing these days.

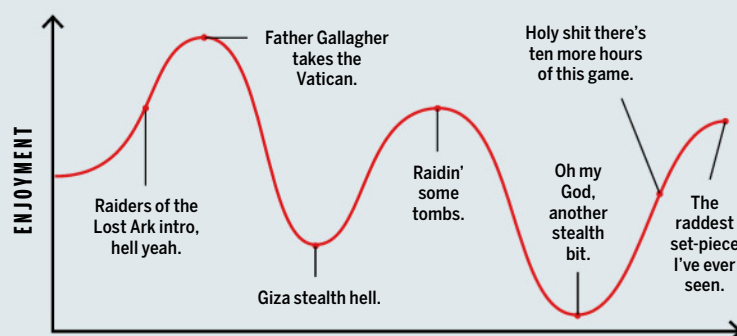
PAPAL STATE OF MIND

Indiana Jones and the Great Circle is organised around three acts with their own open world hubs, with more linear, set-piece missions stringing them together, and these levels are the real triumph of the game: The open ended areas have the density, inspired design, and 'feels like a real place' magic of a *Deus Ex* hub (Paris, Hong Kong, Detroit) or *Dishonored* map, and exploring them was just pure joy.



HIGHS AND LOWS

Charting my enjoyment of *Indiana Jones and the Great Circle*



Indy gets a range of different objectives in the hub zones, with your main story quest front and centre, a selection of three or so story and cutscene-heavy sidequests that are virtually indistinguishable from the main stuff in terms of production values, and then a wide array of bite-sized 'mysteries' or one-off little side puzzles whose stories are mostly told through notes and other clues.

Vatican City is the peak of the game for my money: it's a visual feast, all sumptuous Renaissance interiors and towering architecture over sunny cobbled streets. It feels like there was an *Assassin's Creed* level of historical research (and budget) poured into *The Great Circle's* environments. The urban density of Vatican City also really works in its favour compared to the other two hubs, which have more of a sprawl to them. The Vatican looks like it has a small footprint based on its map, but then you're climbing up and down buildings, crisscrossing through shortcuts, or popping out of windows to shimmy to hard-to-reach areas.

For the climactic bits of the game, *The Great Circle* does console-style, minimally interactive 'wow factor' set pieces better than maybe any game I've played. I usually don't even go for that sort of thing – I like RPGs and systemic interactions and other crusty PC gaming things. Substance, not flash! But *The Great Circle* had scenes that were so imaginative and

surprising, I was just 100% on-board. An early one sees Indy catching a ride on a departing zeppelin by hooking it with his trusty whip, followed by a short sequence of climbing and ledge shimmying on the outside of the dirigible as Rome sprawls below you.

TENURE TRACK

Troy Baker's performance as Indy is killer. He can say he wasn't trying to impersonate Harrison Ford, but I would have confused him for the real thing if I didn't know better. And beyond that, he just gives a phenomenal performance that nails Indy's easy, everyman-concealing-

academic charisma. I'm usually against the digital de-ageing/necromancy thing – qualitative issues aside, I feel like it speaks to how stunted we've gotten culturally, we apparently can't make new movie stars

and have to rehearse the old ones – but I'll make an exception here and hope that Harrison Ford is getting a big fat check in the mail for it.

The rest of the cast is similarly full of winners, calling to mind the great ensemble from the *Wolfenstein* games: you've got a fiery antifascist reporter, a jovial and portly cardinal, a sophisticated aristocratic patron of archeology, and a guerrilla freedom fighter, to name a few. I'd like to make special mention of the late, great Tony Todd's turn as one of the game's antagonists – this may be one

of his final performances, and he just oozes menace, but with a mysterious dignity and gravitas as the eight-foot-tall man who kickstarts the tale.

MachineGames remains the industry leader at making new kinds of sneering Nazi freaks who twirl their proverbial moustaches while declaring, "Oh, you fool, but it is I who has the upper hand." There's this awful fascist-sympathising priest who serves as your act one starter villain at The Vatican – think a stuffy sitcom principle guilty of collaboration with world-historic crimes – and he winds up serving as the perfect punching bag to introduce our true villain, Voss, the freakiest, creepiest, most, "I'll get you next time, Herr Jones!"-ass Nazi bad guy to ever come out of MachineGames' R&D skunkworks. I wanted to punch the guy and shove him down a hill the second he showed up onscreen.

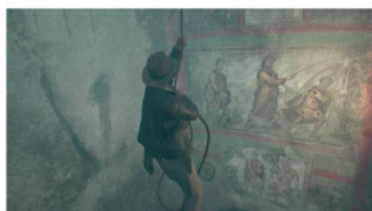
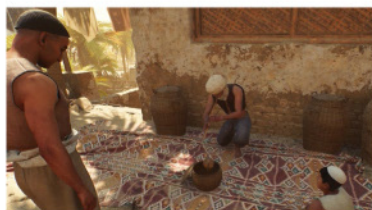
The Great Circle is an odd duck to be sure, combining immersive sim level design with set-piece spectacles that put *Call of Duty* or the Sony first-party stable on notice; incredible graphical technology and triple-A polish with some truly baffling and idiosyncratic design choices. Despite that funkiness, it's one of my favourite releases of this year and a new outing from a top-class studio that was well-worth the wait. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Indiana Jones and the Great Circle is like if an immersive sim got caught in a teleporter accident with *Uncharted*.

86

A phenomenal performance that nails Indy's easy charisma



ABOVE: Climbing and other actions take you to third-person view for greater awareness.



FACE OFF

Absurd bloodsoaked melodrama **SLITTERHEAD** might be the 7/10 of the year

By Abbie Stone

From the creator of *Silent Hill* and *Forbidden Siren* comes a game that spits in the eye of survival horror. *Slitterhead* is a bloody ridiculous action slaughterhouse. You play a mysterious floating entity with no memories (of course) who can possess almost any NPC in the game. You spend your initial moments bouncing between bodies until someone down a dark alley greets you with their head exploding, revealing your first Slitterhead.

Luckily, you can fight back with any NPC you possess, and you're encouraged to constantly hop between civilians with a brief damage bonus each time you do. But if you die three times before escaping your host body, it's game over. *Slitterhead* is no open world game, but its large NPC-packed levels are still a great showcase for this impressive body-hopping tech.

Whacking a Slitterhead in the back, watching it turn its understandably-angry attention onto you, then leaping into another body behind it and hitting it in the back again is a delightfully cheap treat. NPCs can also lob a sort-of blood grenade, though ripping vital fluids out of your own body understandably comes with a steep health cost. Fortunately you soon meet Julee, a 'rarity' who unlocks a host of new powers when you first possess her.

BLOOD SIMPLE

Julee can grow huge Wolverine-style claws out of her hands made out of (you guessed it!) surprisingly solid blood. Rarities are made of slightly sturdier stuff, and are discovered at a decent clip, keeping combat varied with new powers. Anita's Devil Scent summons a crowd of NPCs, and that pairs perfectly with her Mind Hack that makes them all go on the attack, no pesky possession required. Blake's Bloody Shot is essentially an OP minigun firing blood bullets, and I'd like to take this opportunity to thank it for helping me get this review done on time.

Outside of the ferocious core combat, the game struggles

Outside of the ferocious core combat, however, the game struggles. Chase sequences, where you jump between bodies to make up the distance and keep firing attacks like poison darts to wear your target down, can be exhilarating. The problem starts with the blood jump. These huge leaps into the sky are completely context-sensitive, a tiresome bit of game design I really can't wait to go extinct.

They often grind a chase to a halt as you spin the camera around, looking for the stupid prompt to tell you the specific spot where you can blood

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Bloodsoaked action game in which you quantum leap into different bodies to fight monsters

EXPECT TO PAY
£48

DEVELOPER
Bokeh Game Studio Inc

PUBLISHER
Bokeh Game Studio Inc

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5 12500H,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2631250/Slitterhead/

jump to next. It's a good thing there isn't a time limit.

Hang on, why isn't there a time limit? Surely the desperate pursuit of a Slitterhead before they gobble up another victim should be the game's great motivator? Nope, you have all the time in the world. It's really deflating to sprint around a corner during a dramatic chase only to catch the Slitterhead waiting for you.

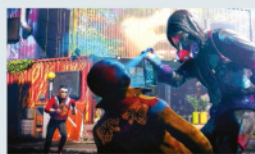
BLOODY SILLY

The game sings when it leans into the silliness. Like a gratuitous sex scene interrupted by a monster attack (perverts annoyed that Bloober Team's *Silent Hill 2* remake toned down the sexuality will be thrilled to hear that *Slitterhead* is often hornier than the average orgy). A housekeeper rarity who uses oven mitts as a weapon and a villain so evil they probably burn down orphanages on their days off are both invited to this party. I all-but applauded when one rarity abandoned the cause and the protagonist started talking to all the other rarities as if they'd been through a bad breakup. Bless its melodramatic absurd little heart.

Still, by the 15-hour mark, *Slitterhead* starts outstaying its welcome. Especially when it forces you to replay earlier levels in order to progress. There's more skill points and optional boss battles to find, but this just feels like unnecessary padding in a game that could've easily lost a few hours anyway. But it's still a stylish joyously-daft playable B-movie with a great central body-hopping idea, and I'd be first in line for a sequel that finds more creative uses for it. Until then, a goofy action bloodbath will more than suffice. ■

QUANTUM LEAP

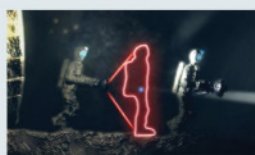
Other games that let you body swap



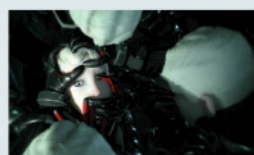
WATCH DOGS LEGION
Bored of playing everybokes in Ubisoft open worlds? Recruit a swearsy grandma instead!



DRIVER: SAN FRANCISCO
Criminally underplayed car-hopping classic that lets you possess any driver on the road.



THE SWAPPER
Morbid puzzle adventure where you constantly swap between disposable clones of yourself.



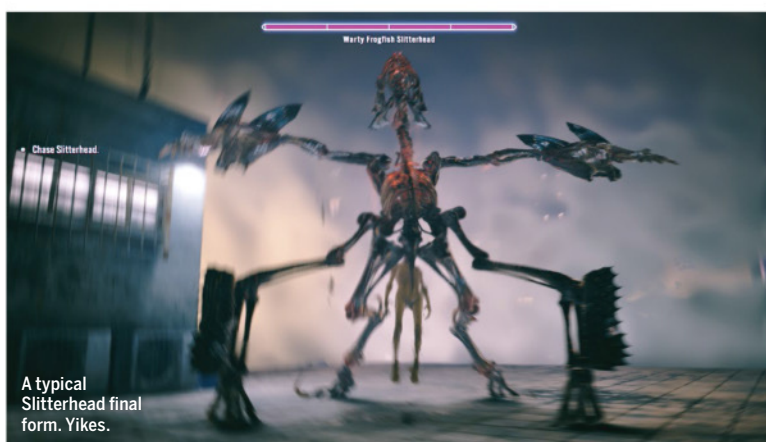
ECHO
OK, technically you're fighting clones of yourself in this one, but please play this stealth gem.

PC GAMER VERDICT

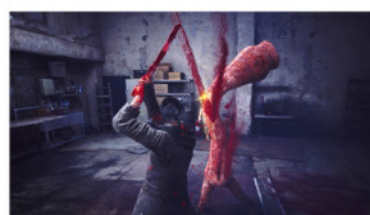
Bokeh Game Studio Inc's *Slitterhead* is a fun but flawed slaughterfest with a great NPC-possession hook.

70

The first Slitterhead you meet down a dark alley. H-hi there!



A typical Slitterhead final form. Yikes.



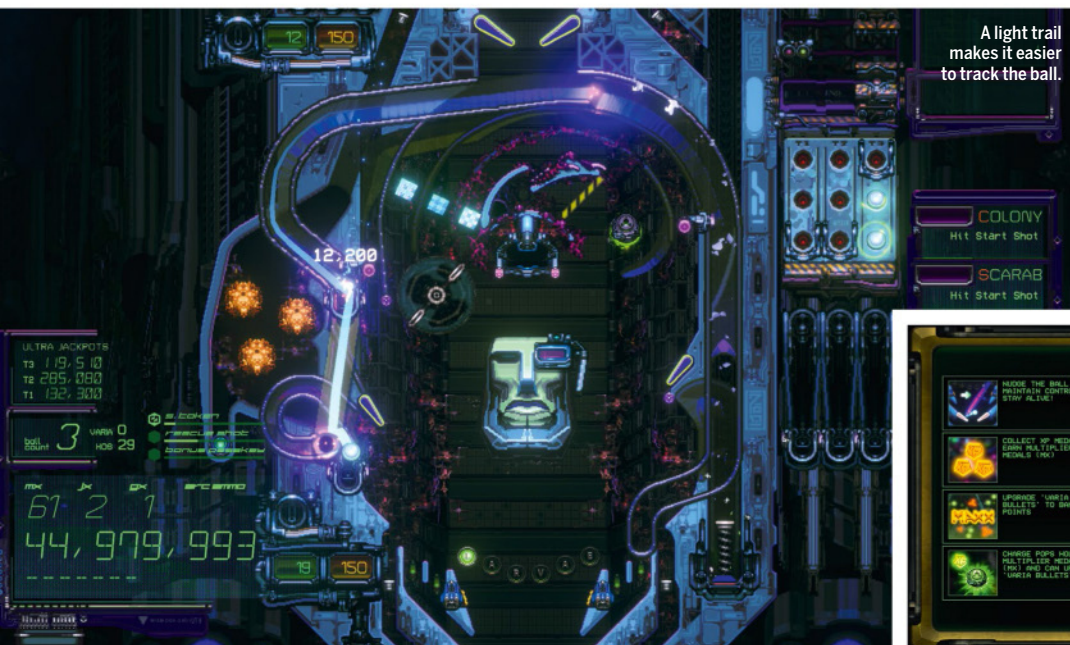
LEFT: You'll meet a cult of Slitterheads and people living in harmony. Um... good luck!



Blake's blood minigun is almost as fun as his constant British blokey barks.

rsue Alex (Leopard Head) and the daughter.

Poison Ward Lv2: A poisonous field moderately damages the body.

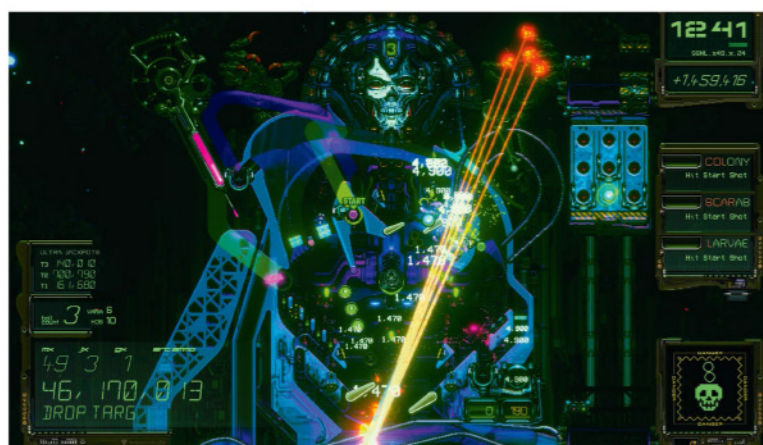
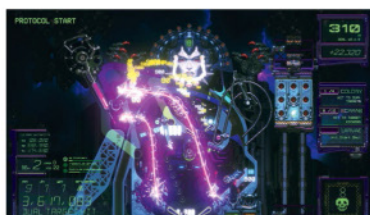


A light trail makes it easier to track the ball.



RIGHT: Crisis mode adds a panic-inducing timer to the mix.

FAR RIGHT: Pinball tables aren't supposed to fight back, are they?



The loading screen art is awe-inspiring – and a little intimidating too.

FLIPPING PERFECTION

XENOTILT: HOSTILE PINBALL ACTION reinvents pinball as a laser-guided cyberpunk shmup

By Kerry Brunskill

I thought I could handle this. I knew I was in for another round of traditional pinball skill mixed with shmup-like sprays of bullets, just like the developer's previous "occult pinball action" hit, *Demon's Tilt*. But no, I was initially as overwhelmed by *Xenotilt: Hostile Pinball Action's* riot of colour, fireworks, and pixelated retro cyberpunk style as anyone. There are energy scythes, cyber-scorpion women and dragon-adjudicated billiards here.

Xenotilt has just one table, but it's so big it's essentially three different pinball machines stacked on top of each other, each zone feeling like a section of a spaceship with multiple states and features. I never thought I'd want auto-firing turrets in my pinball games, but now I've been given a taste of it I'm not sure I could ever go back.

So I spent most of my very short first few attempts admiring all the lights, sometimes with my monitor tilted on its side so I could bask in the game's vertical glory, and feeling... pretty good about it all, in spite of my poor performance. Even the smallest score multiplier sets off an encouraging wave of screen-sized celebrations.

Time and practice eventually cut through the awe I had for the game's gorgeous (and extremely customisable) bloom lighting and special effects. I started looking for specific lanes and labels, eager to claim the most recent jackpot I'd earned – or strategically add another ball to the perk-granting multiball matrix on the side of the screen.

In spite of the outlandish nature of some of *Xenotilt's* features – it's not every day you play a pinball game that actively fights back – the game's reactions are always learnably consistent, and the table isn't as harsh as its menacing retro-cyber style might imply. Every major potential point of run-ending failure has some subtle sort of safety net ready to stop a game from abruptly ending to a single moment of bad luck. And the directional tilt is more than extremely

lenient, it's practically expected in some areas of the board.

Score and surviving are important, but I was starting to figure out that *Xenotilt* is all about cycles of objective

completion. The game has an abundance of helpful tips to make that easier, and whenever I try a new mode I'm greeted with a short explanation of its core features.

Xenotilt's EX variant includes

score-enhancing survivors to permanently unlock and recruit, as well as tri-gifts – powerful effects awarded after defeating one of the

Pinball for people who love laser-firing mecha-dinos

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Eyeball-searing cyberpunk pinball bliss

EXPECT TO PAY
£12.80

DEVELOPER
WIZNWAR, FLARB LLC

PUBLISHER
FLARB LLC

REVIEWED ON
IntelCore i9-13900HX,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
xenotilt.com

table's bosses. Hardcore mode uses slightly smaller flippers, which demand tighter ball control and expert use of the tilt function. The only thing that matters here is surviving as long as possible, and to do that I have to risk it all by going after the time-adding targets on the table.

Whatever mode I'm playing, it's always tense and exciting and I feel like my knowledge and abilities are being tested in an interesting way. On very good runs I end up with random bonuses that dwarf scores I used to need three balls to earn. Not that I always notice my final tally: there have been times I've started a new game so fast after finishing the last one that I didn't even take in my score. Seeing where I've landed on the leaderboard could wait for later, because in those moments I just needed to play more *Xenotilt*.

PINBALL PARADISE

Xenotilt isn't just pinball for people who already know they like pinball games. It's pinball for people who love laser-firing mecha-dinos. It's even pinball for people who think they don't like pinball, the game different enough – and encouraging enough, thanks to a challenge tracker that always seems to be on the cusp of recognising another achievement – to offer an attractive, understandable, and unusual approach to the genre.

The fact that a great game lasts mere minutes and a full restart takes just a few seconds makes this the perfect game for all occasions, whether I've got 15 minutes and a Steam Deck in hand, or an entire free evening in front of my PC. I should warn you though, if you're anything like me you can kiss your life goodbye once you start playing. ■

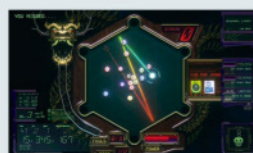
WIZARDRY

Xenotilt has everything pinball ever needed



DINOSAURS

Like boss battles against laser-spewing cyber T-Rexes with exposed hearts. Roarsome!



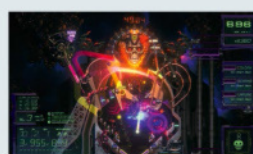
MINIGAMES

Who doesn't fancy the chance to play billiards with dragons? Nobody, that's who.



FRIENDS

Pinball survivors to rescue. Unlock these characters for companionship while pinballing.



NIGHTMARE FUEL

And terrifying metal skulls that are sure to haunt your dreams. I haven't slept well in days.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Demon's Tilt sequel *Xenotilt* always has me promising myself one more go... just like it did the last one more go.

92

EMBRACE THE CHAOS

SONIC X SHADOW GENERATIONS is a blast from the recent past

By Matt Poskitt

Sega continues its remaster treatment of the blue blur's varied catalogue, now turning its attention to one of the most popular in *Sonic Generations*. Originally released back in 2011, the platformer sees classic 2D Sonic team up with modern 3D Sonic in a time-travelling adventure. This time an all-new campaign starring Shadow the Hedgehog has been bundled to entice returning fans and undoubtedly promote excitement for the character's big-screen debut.

Running parallel with *Sonic Generations*, *Shadow Generations* is a similar time-twisting tale that sees the Ultimate Lifeform confront an old foe, Black Doom. It's a very cookie-cutter story about aliens wanting to take over the world, nothing groundbreaking but some interesting details flesh out Shadow's backstory. The main draw is the levels themselves, providing fantastic fluid gameplay through cities, space stations and ancient ruins. Midway through, a Doctor Strange-like kaleidoscope sequence breaks up the pace to great effect, overall delivering four to five-minute bursts of brilliant adrenaline.

Leaning closer towards the 3D aspects than the 2D, this is the best Shadow has felt since his first appearance in *Sonic Adventure 2*. As someone who prefers this style – the 2D levels in *Sonic Generations* have aged worse over time – this was a real treat. Sega's level design is great, substantially improving Rail Canyon from *Sonic Heroes* and Chaos Island from *Sonic Frontiers*, to name a few.

In total, there are six main 3D stages, all with differing degrees of quality. All are pretty good with the best (Kingdom Valley from *Sonic 06*) being downright thrilling and the worst (Sunset Heights from *Sonic Forces*) being fine to forgettable. What helps is the electrifying soundtrack that makes you feel like a daredevil. Crush 40 fans will rejoice. On top of this, a bunch of 2.5D side-scroller levels and challenge acts are thrown in for good measure.

The beauty I'm finding with each is their replayability, discovering the best pathways and racing up the online leaderboards – perfect for speedrunners. That coupled with a paid post-launch movie pack featuring Keanu Reeves ensures that I'll be jumping in and out for months to come. It is bizarre, however, that not one level from Shadow's own game from 2005 is included. Only Sega.

Taking inspiration from the open-zone gameplay of *Sonic Frontiers*, Shadow is placed in the hub world of White Space in

Racing up the online leaderboards is perfect for speedrunners

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A remaster of 2011's *Sonic Generations* with a new campaign starring Shadow the Hedgehog

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Sonic Team

PUBLISHER
Sega

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-10600K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1080 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
sonicxshadowgenerations.com

between stages. This is a large 3D blank void with a burgeoning set of structures to traverse, ushering you from one section to another. There are plenty of collectibles and a handful of timed obstacle courses alongside friends to speak with, yet none of it ever inspires anything that worthwhile. The best it does is introduce and integrate Shadow's new Doom Powers.

These new abilities allow Shadow to throw spears at enemies, grapple morph balls, surf across water and glide through the air. Every power feels fresh, adding another interesting layer on how to get from start to end. Doom Blast, in particular, is wicked fun. Shadow strikes an opponent upwards, then launches them into the distance before warping to the impact point. Every Doom Power shines in boss fights, thanks to the blockbuster scale that the series is known for. Chaos Control has never been better utilised, either. By filling the Chaos Gauge, time is stopped and new routes are unlocked. All of which goes a long way to separating Shadow from Sonic.

Shadow Generations never outstays its welcome. It runs up to 120fps but 60fps did the job admirably. On the other hand, *Sonic Generations* is locked at 60fps and though it plays better, a 120fps patch would have been nice. At least, tons of mods are available for the latter.

Not that it's needed as racing from Green Hill Zone to Planet Wisp is a blast today as it was 14 years ago. New upgraded visuals, reworked cinematics and voice work and the introduction of *Sonic Mania*'s Drop Dash refine what was already a stellar outing. Even so, this has left Sonic chasing Shadow. ■

1 HEDGE

A black anthropomorphic hedgehog who is haunted by his past.

2 HOG

Project Shadow was created 50 years ago by Professor Gerald Robotnik.

3 BLUES

Rocket Skates that are still as cool as ever.

SHADOW THE HEDGEHOG

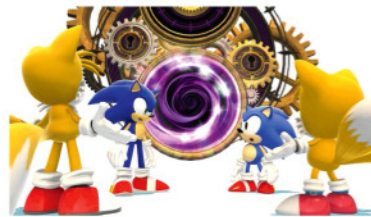
What makes the Ultimate Life Form?



PC GAMER VERDICT

Sonic Generations walked so *Shadow Generations* could run. This is nostalgia done absolutely right.

80



FAR LEFT: In the new campaign, the beastly Black Doom is Shadow's foe.

BELOW: With up to 120fps on offer, you can definitely feel the speed if your rig can handle it.



BUG LIFE

EMPIRE OF THE ANTS has a pretty, small world without much else

By Jonathan Bolding

Zooming in on tiny things and imagining what life is like for them: it never gets old. Like platformer *Unravel* and Obsidian survival game *Grooved*, new RTS *Empire of the Ants* plops us into the world of macro photography. It does a great job of showing us the world from an ant's perspective, where pebbles are boulders and a beetle is an elephant, but you've really got to love that feeling for it to work, because as an RTS campaign, it's not great.

In *Empire of the Ants* you're 103,683rd, a warrior-caste red wood ant who fights for their confederation of ant colonies against the much larger world's wonders and horrors.

It's a whimsical world – drawn from a series of French novels – and although the game mechanics aren't anything special, and the campaign missions are a letdown more often than not, there is an undeniable delight in exploring its tiny world. This is a game about beauty and enjoyable scenery above all else.

The visuals almost aggressively leap at you with as photorealistic a set of greenery and logs and other tiny things as Unreal Engine 5 can muster. The many insects and arachnids and more have believable texture to their exoskeletons that varies between species and type. I was especially enamoured by the huge ferns, grasses and flowers your ant can climb all around on. The surfaces aren't always as detailed as insect carapace, sure, but the way your ant's legs twist to clutch at the stem as you climb or spread out on smoother surfaces is a lot of good detail that games often struggle to represent. It's simply a very fun, and pretty, game to move about in.

The huge artefacts of the larger human world are a delight. A rugged old soccer ball features quite early on and looks delightfully realistic with its worn stitching and fraying panels and slick slug-trail from a circling, curious creature. These human objects are accompanied by ant-scale descriptions wondering what they

might be. "We can't eat the soccer ball," says one, "it's not real leather". "Avoid a glass jar in the summer," says another, "as it gets very hot".

That does of course make the places that lack similar detail very obvious: you can build little wood walls for your nests, for example, but you just clip right through them when walking. Lack of attention to game mechanical detail is painful in your average

mission, because much of *Empire of the Ants* isn't actually RTS missions – it's platforming around these worlds as a little ant. Which is fun when you're traversing and sightseeing. But the actual goals of most of those platformer segments

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Photorealistic third-person ant-on-ant violence RTS

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Tower Fire

PUBLISHER
Microïds

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900, 32GB RAM, AMD Radeon RX 6800 XT

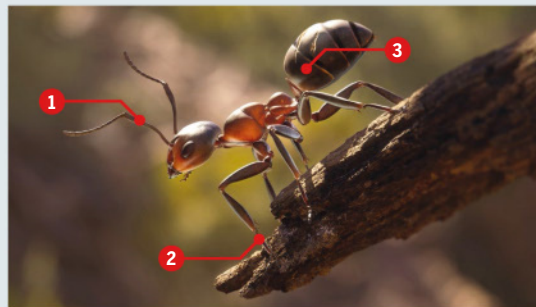
MULTIPLAYER
Online 1v1 and free-for-all PvP

LINK
microïds.com/
empire-of-the-ants

A game about beauty and enjoyable scenery above all else

FORMICA RUFA

Our brave hero fights for nest and federation



1 FEELERS
Necessary for sniffing pheromones during hide-and-seek with lost worker caste.

2 SCRABBLERS
Suction pad and claws combine to traverse every surface known to antkind. Except water of course.

3 SCARS
Our hero is a vet who has lived through more than one winter... and leaves the fighting to younger ants.

boil down to a timed scavenger hunt that has you rushing about fighting with the awful UI.

THE ANTGONY OF DEFEAT

As a whimsical ant exploration simulator, *Empire of the Ants* is doing pretty well, but it's in theory a third-person RTS first and foremost. That part of it is lacking quite sorely. Running around and directing your ants around to take new nests is simple enough but often too simple. The battles are largely deterministic affairs where you can see from the start which side would win and which will lose because of the Warrior-Worker-Spitter unit triad forming a Rock-Paper-Scissors counter system. It's very simple stuff though and doesn't exactly inspire a range of tactical scenarios.

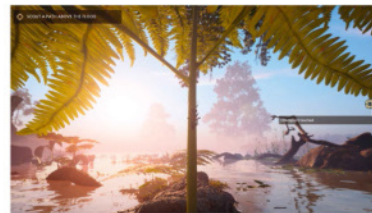
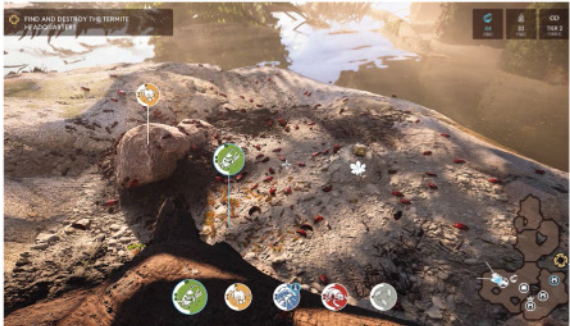
That becomes painfully obvious in multiplayer, where the battles devolve pretty quickly into who's quicker on the draw to take resources and leverage them rather than any interesting or tactical interactions.

The biggest problem is that the two halves of *Empire of the Ants* are both mediocre and at war with each other. It wants it to be an interesting blend of puzzle-platformer and small-scale tactics game, but it strictly separates the two types of play. Campaign missions are always either exploration or strategic scenarios, and the exploration is only sometimes engaging or mysterious or surprising enough to justify itself. A *Pikmin*-style game blends the two gameplay types into a fluid whole, with larger levels or regions that reward exploration with strategic bonuses. As it is, I feel like I'm moving between tech demo and RTS in stutters and stops. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Has lavish vistas of the world from a few millimetres high, but fails at the basics of interesting RTS play.

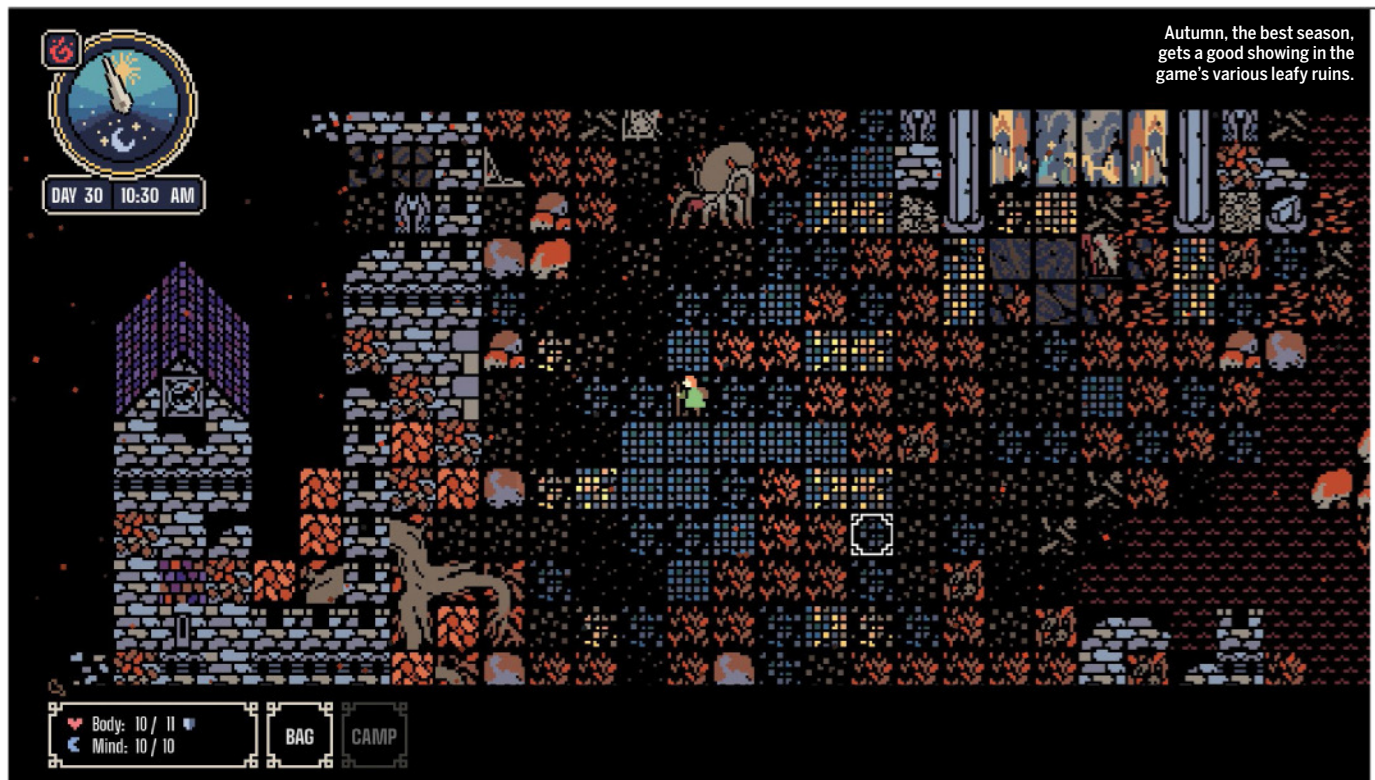
60



ABOVE: Butterflies serve as challenge goals to reach.

LEFT: Ant names are very direct, if not very practical.





WILD WOOD

Striking RPG **TRAVELLER'S HYMN** is less hard and more cor

In the wake of *Moonring* and *Skald: Against the Black Priory*, here's another vaguely *Ultima*-esque top-down RPG with a beautiful tileset and some modern bells and whistles. Where you could lose yourself in *Moonring*'s systems and lore, *Traveller's Hymn* is a smaller, more streamlined affair. It's a comfortable stomp round an autumnal forest where you're unlikely to trip over a hidden branch or lose your way among the trees for too long.

In fact, *Traveller's Hymn*'s colour palette might be my favourite thing about it, as you explore forests and ruins lavishly draped in orange and red and gold. My other favourite thing is that I don't have to worry about spec'ing my character: there are only a couple of stats, and no levelling to consider. Just gear to equip and a battle system that plays like *Final Fantasy* if your hand was swatted away whenever you tried to intervene.

You explore the world by hopping from one tile to the next, and when you make contact with an enemy there's a pop-up battle. Your character stands on the left, and one enemy stands politely to the right, trading blows automatically until someone is defeated. The stats are

taken into account, along with health bars that are pretty difficult to refill. As you find or buy new weapons and armour, you'll gradually rise to the top of the heap in this mid-sized, spooky but cosy world.

You explore the world by hopping from one tile to the next

TRAVEL LIGHT

You might feel differently, but I struggle with the bookkeeping and theorycrafting that many RPGs overwhelm us with. I just want to jump in and explore, at

least to start with. *Traveller's Hymn* gets going almost immediately, as you roam the world to find mysterious items for an unknown reason. The game's confidently handled streamlining – such a maligned and loaded term – is probably the best thing about it. In addition to that

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A turn-based, top-down adventure that feels like a gentler *Ultima*

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Aquatic Ranger Studio

PUBLISHER
Aquatic Ranger Studio

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/TravellersHymn

combat system, there's a simple drag-and-drop inventory and a no-fuss crafting system for cooking the necessary meals.

As restoring your health is a matter of eating food, and then waiting quite a while for your health bars to refill, it's all too easy to overstretch a scouting mission and suffer defeat while you're still digesting your stew. But you only lose a little gold – and none of your items – when you wake up in bed, while any progress made in dungeons remains intact. There are so many hardcore RPGs that such an act of charity is almost touching, and it's still punishing enough for exploration to retain an element of peril.

Traveller's Hymn probably won't have the lifespan of its peers – but then it doesn't have such a heavy buy-in. All you need is your mouse, a sense of curiosity and some tolerance for ponderous exploration. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A gorgeous, atmospheric RPG that focuses on exploration and discovery rather than builds and stats.

80

BELOW: The pixel art is incredible.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Guillem Espias

LINK
bit.ly/CampsiteGame

THE DIG

Three kids have a night to remember in **THE CAMPSITE**

Warm-hearted adventure game *The Campsite* has some of the best pixel art I've seen in, well, any game. The characters are expressively animated and the backgrounds are sumptuously drawn. You can understand why there are only a few of them, but a satisfying adventure nevertheless unfolds in this small, detailed space.

The adventure takes the form of a treasure hunt, where three kids liberate a classic car and head off into the jungle in search of the booty, and there are some lovely, not too tricky puzzles as you work your way to the conclusion. Many of them revolve around that car, as you manipulate its outside and interior to build your camp and ultimately access the dig site, and each solution is accompanied by more of that fluid

animation, not to mention more fun banter between the children.

The Campsite delivers when you solve its puzzles and advance the story, but it is lacking when it comes to the interactivity of its scenes. You can't click on anything to examine it, or even chat to your friends of your own volition, and these are two elements that do much to enrich the stories of adventure games. It can also be difficult to work out your objectives, with little dialogue or descriptive text to guide you along.

I was pretty bummed when I discovered that, but as I followed the story and where it was (unexpectedly) leading me, the more impressed I became. There's a sort of twist towards the end: one of the best reveals I've seen in any game, and it's all the greater for how subtly it's delivered. ■

74

OINK OINK

BALLOON JERKS is Puzzle Bobble but with pigs

Puzzle *Bobble* is my favourite match-three game, so it's great to find an indie game that builds on the concept, adding further ingredients to the formula until it's popping with freshness once again. *Balloon Jerks* has you playing as a couple of pigs whose balloon-bursting fun is ruined by annoying wolves.

As you punt balloons up into the screen, clearing clutches, the wolves will add to the mess by floating upwards on their own balloons. There's an adorable animation as they deposit the balloon and then parachute to the ground, and an even cuter one when you interrupt their fun by shooting them out of the sky. Visual flair aside, it's also a clever mechanic that keeps you permanently on your trotters by adding little bursts of time pressure.

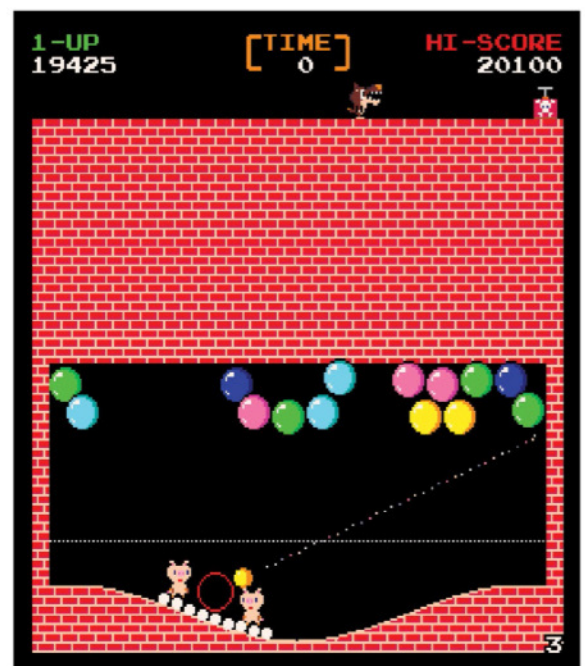
Can you afford to let that red-balloon-carrying wolf complete their ascent and deposit their balloon? Or should you use your next balloon to shoot them down in mid-air? The absolute best feeling is when you can kill two birds with one balloon, slotting a coloured orb in the right place while also downing one of the troublesome wolves.

The standard *Puzzle Bobble* ball-matching is quickly embellished with other ideas, including the bottom of the screen being flooded with water and Wildcard Balloons that cycle through every colour. There's even a separate mode where you bounce the pigs off a see-saw, which is worth playing for the look of panic on their porcine faces as they plummet to the ground.

Balloon Jerks is so fun that you'll surely want to return to it frequently. ■

78

BELOW: This level puts the pigs on skates.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Paul Hammond

LINK
bit.ly/BalloonJerks

True horror is an awkward family dinner with people who don't share your values.



PLANTATION 42

Meal and squeals in **RESIDENT EVIL 7: BIOHAZARD**

Relatable horror is a powerful, underused thing. I recall an audience of men groaning in sympathy as Cillian Murphy shaved off his beard with a blunt Bic razor in *28 Days Later*. In many ways, it's more effective than arms being yanked from sockets or kneecaps exploding. *Resident Evil 7* presents the most visceral, relatable horror of all: going to somebody else's house.

The first hour of *Resi 7* does a magnificent job of toying with these latent fears. It's like visiting a long-lost, aggressively-fragraned aunt in her house full of priceless ceramic Pekingese dogs, except that the threat of breakages is replaced with the distinct possibility of losing a limb. Even on a second or third playthrough, the constant scratching unease is about as scary as the franchise gets. Every moment of progress is accompanied by a sense of mounting horror: the fear that, by solving a puzzle, you're giving the game permission to kick your nerves around like a rotten apple in a playground. It helps that the Baker estate is custom-built for horror: a foul, decaying shamble in which you're always dimly aware

of the shuffling footsteps of whoever (or whatever) is chasing you. It reaches its peak during the dinner sequence, which recalls the all-encompassing, childlike horror of being forced to eat something you don't really fancy; the liver and onions of first-person scare sequences.

It helps that the Baker estate is custom-built for horror

BAKER OFF
The memory of *Resident Evil 7* is of a supremely strong opening that doesn't quite sustain the terror the whole way through.

This is true to a point: it rarely gets worse than the horror of being hunted by Jack Baker, who seems to burst through walls with all the predatory instinct of a father sensing the thermostat being altered. In truth, the game maintains this level of anxiety for far longer than you'd

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Like going to The Evil Dead's house for dinner and dessert

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
Capcom

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/418370/Resident_Evil_7_Biohazard

expect. The tension should break the second you get a gun. But the ammo scarcity, coupled with the fact Ethan Winters is just a random chad instead of a special forces badass, means that *Resi 7* rarely takes its mouldering boot off your throat. You do end up feeling capable by the end of the game – especially if you've managed your ammo like a Boomer hoarding generational wealth – and this makes Ethan more useful than the lackwitted bumpkins from the original *Resident Evil's* STARS team.

But, despite that, the human connection and personal motivation help make this feel more like a desperate found-footage horror (even if the girl you came to Louisiana to rescue went feral and chopped your hand off with a chainsaw). It might be a world away from the Spencer mansion in terms of aesthetics, but *Resi 7* remains the perfect update in terms of raw, unknowable terror. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Brilliantly paced and thoughtfully plotted, *Resident Evil 7* somehow still retains the power to shred your nerves.

92

BELOW: Carry On Up My Barrow was not the comeback it needed.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£11.40

DEVELOPER
Cloak & Dagger Games

PUBLISHER
Wadjet Eye Games

LESS IS MOOR

You can't help but dig **THE EXCAVATION OF HOB'S BARROW**

It's always lovely when a game set in England shows us somewhere other than London. It might be four times smaller than California, but *Old Blighty* has a tremendous degree of variety: accents change every five miles and the landscapes can switch as quickly as the word for 'bread roll'.

The Excavation of Hob's Barrow probably takes place in bun territory – further north would be barmcakes; further west, breadcakes – in a village called Bewley, which is pronounced as written but feels like it should be spelled Beaghlieugh. What starts as an antiquarian mystery quickly becomes personal for Thomasina Bateman, and Samantha Béart's performance brings believable warmth and drive to the story. Even when surrounded by gruff, northern probably-bigots, Thomasina remains

so positive that even the game's grumpiest NPCs become endearing ("Capital!"). A single night in Bewley is enough to make you feel like you're waking up in a distinct place with its own character and history. I'd be happy with a mystery in a location like this, but the folk horror undertones and gentle sense of humour make it feel like an Aardman animation of a Robert Aickman story. I could talk about how I like the layered puzzles and the elegant quality of life upgrades that make getting around easier.

But, honestly, the highest praise I can pay the game is that immediately after playing it I looked up how long it would take me to drive to Stoney Littleton Long Barrow for a misty morning walk. The warning to the curious in *Hob's Barrow* fell on deaf ears, apparently. ■

84

HAY DUDE

Alpinism for my loved ones in **MUNDAUN**

It's nice to see a hand-drawn game I can relate to. That's not to suggest, on any level, that I'm capable of recreating the art in *Mundaun*. More that the game's mix of scratchy, sepia-toned pencil etchings feels more relatable to me than the sleek lines of a *Hollow Knight* or *Cuphead*.

It also helps with the cloying sense of alpine dread. From the opening moments, the look and feel of *Mundaun* recalls those bleak, upsetting European animations that traumatised you as a child, causing you to Google them years later as a means of catharsis. This bold design choice encapsulates everything good and bad about the game: at its best, it's unique, unsettling, and effective; at its worst, it feels impractical and glum. The opening, in which you wind around dizzying mountain

roads in a rickety bus, is like playing a court drawing of *Skyrim*. But the aesthetic feels like it's acting against you sometimes, especially when you're squinting through enclosed spaces like a grandad trying to check the Riboflavin content in his muesli. The lowest ebb, is the combat, which takes an already-glacial experience and adds a paralysis mechanic that causes more frustration than fear. It's worse because I love the story and want to rush to uncover more, but, instead, I find myself jabbing at straw monsters with pitchforks or hiding in hay bales. It feels like a stolid addition to a refreshingly odd game, and it shatters the slowly-building sense of dread – not least because our hero, Curdin, barely seems to notice that the harvest has come to life and is trying to kill him. It's not enough for me to bale out, but it's close. ■

BELOW: Reason #124 why church is the last place I'd go if I was scared.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Hidden Fields

PUBLISHER
Annapurna Interactive

65

THE PEN IS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD.



THE PLUCKY SQUIRE

A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL STORYBOOK ADVENTURE

LEAP FROM THE 2D
PAGES OF A BOOK...



...INTO AN INCREDIBLE
3D WORLD BEYOND!



AVAILABLE NOW!

ON PC, PLAYSTATION, XBOX, AND NINTENDO SWITCH



HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

92

GROUP TEST

Six new gaming CPUs tested and rated. Find out which is best now.



102

THE BUILD

How to build this MSI Project Zero PC, with a part-by-part breakdown.

98

TECH REPORT

When was the last game that was actually worth upgrading your PC for?

100

TECH TALES

The mistakes every PC gamer has made during an upgrade project.

104

BUYER'S GUIDE

The PC Gamer-approved components guide, from budget to premium.



GROUP TEST

GAMING CPUs

If you're looking to upgrade your gaming PC's processor, there's a stack of new models to choose from. But which is best for you?

By Nick Evanson



The last year has been one of change for AMD and Intel, with both rolling out new ranges of desktop CPUs. The former launched the Ryzen 9000-series in August, using its Zen 5 architecture, which is an overhaul of Zen 4

for more speed. Intel released the Core Ultra 200S lineup in October, based on Arrow Lake, its first multi-tile chip for desktop PCs.

The old Core names are now gone, along with Hyper-Threading and support for DDR4. In their place is a big reduction in power. Let's go!





Ryzen 5 9600X

AMD £270

Little Zen

1 It's the cheapest of all the new processors from AMD and Intel, but don't let the price deceive you. The Ryzen 5 9600X might just be all the gaming CPU you need.

Compared to the last-gen Ryzen 5 7600X, the new model sips at power in games, making it very easy to cool and ideal for use in compact and small form factor builds. Some motherboards let you increase the power limit, but the Zen 5 chip doesn't run much better with more power. While six cores might seem like a small amount, it's more than enough for most games and you can overclock it,

if you want a bit more poke. It's only when you turn to content creation and heavy multithreaded tasks that the little Ryzen struggles against the competition.

The only major thing that stands in the way of picking the Ryzen 5 9600X is that the last-gen Ryzen 5 7600X is still being made and it's a lot cheaper than the new model. This is true for all Zen 5 chips, though, and their prices will fall in time.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Solid gaming performance
- Easy to cool
- Zen 4 is cheaper

SPECS CORES: 6 / THREADS: 12 / BASE CLOCK: 3.9 GHz / BOOST CLOCK: 5.4 GHz / L3 CACHE: 32 MB
/ TDP: 65 W / SOCKET: AM5

Ryzen 7 9700X

AMD £340

Everyone's Zen

2 If you want an AMD processor that's great at gaming and handling all kinds of productivity tasks, without ruining your wallet, then the Ryzen 7 9700X is a great choice and is one of the best all-round CPUs I've tested.

While not much faster than its predecessor, the Ryzen 7 7700X, it uses way less power in games and content creation. That makes the chip easier to keep cool but it also means your PC is cheaper to run and quieter to use.

You'd expect a jack-of-all-trades chip to be weak at something but that's not the case

here, with support for 16 threads and a high 5.5 GHz boost clock. You can give it more power with some AM5 socket motherboards but like its Ryzen 5 sibling, it won't run noticeably better.

The only problem the Ryzen 7 9700X faces is that the last-gen 7700X can be had for a lot less money and it's not that much slower in games. But if heat and noise are your bugbears, as they are for me, then Zen 5 is the way to go.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Good all-round performance
- Sips power in all tasks
- Zen 4 is better value

SPECS CORES: 8 / THREADS: 16 / BASE CLOCK: 3.8 GHz / BOOST CLOCK: 5.5 GHz / L3 CACHE: 32 MB
/ TDP: 65 W / SOCKET: AM5

BY FAR THE BEST
GAMING CPU
I'VE SEEN



GROUP TEST

Ryzen 9 9950X

AMD £610

All Core Zen

3 When it comes to blasting through content creation workloads, such as 3D rendering or video editing, the Ryzen 9 9950X is pretty hard to beat thanks to its 32 threads and high clock speeds.

The big Zen 5 chip is no slouch in games, too, though it can be a little picky about what settings you use and which drivers you have installed. As with all AMD Ryzen processors that have more than eight cores, a fresh installation of Windows is a must to ensure everything is correctly set up, in terms of software support.

That 170 W power limit might seem daunting but paired with a decent AIO liquid cooler, it'll run cool and quiet all day long. It can use quite a bit of energy when idle, though it depends on what motherboard you use.

You pay a pretty penny for all those cores and threads, and the high price is difficult to swallow when last-gen Ryzen 9 processors are much cheaper and not especially that much slower in comparison.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Ace multithreaded performance
- Runs very cool
- Expensive

SPECS CORES: 16 / THREADS: 32 / BASE CLOCK: 4.3 GHz / BOOST CLOCK: 5.7 GHz / L3 CACHE: 64 MB
/ TDP: 170 W / SOCKET: AM5

Ryzen 7 9800X3D

AMD £450

Gaming Zen

4 If all you care about is having the best possible performance in games, then there's only one CPU worth choosing and it's the Ryzen 7 9800X3D. It's by far the best gaming CPU I've seen. The gaming crown used to be worn by the last-gen Ryzen 7 7800X3D but AMD has reworked its 3D V-Cache technology to now sit underneath the chiplet housing all of the cores and cache. The result is a CPU that runs faster and cooler, and that extra L3 cache really helps with power efficiency. Not every game will benefit from the presence of the

3D V-Cache and you ideally need a powerful graphics card to take full advantage of the performance gains. But if you want a gaming CPU to last for many years to come, it's the one to pick. The Ryzen 7 7800X3D and 9800X3D are both super popular with PC gamers and stocks of both chips disappear quickly. If you can find the previous gen model for a decent price, then you'll still be getting a very fast gaming chip.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Eye-popping fps
- Super efficient
- 7800X3D is still around

SPECS CORES: 16 / THREADS: 32 / BASE CLOCK: 4.7 GHz / BOOST CLOCK: 5.2 GHz / L3 CACHE: 96 MB
/ TDP: 120 W / SOCKET: AM5



GROUP TEST

**NEW CORE ULTRA
200S CHIPS USE WAY
LESS POWER THAN
PREVIOUS INTEL CPUS**



BENCHMARKS

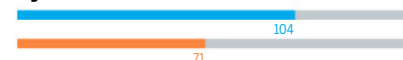
Baldur's Gate III
1080p, Ultra quality, RTX 4070

■ Average fps (higher is better) ■ 1% Low fps (higher is better)

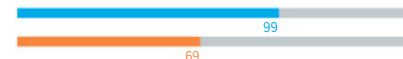
Ryzen 7 9800X3D



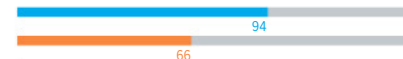
Ryzen 9 9950X



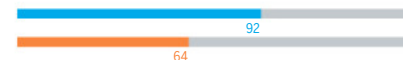
Ryzen 7 9700X



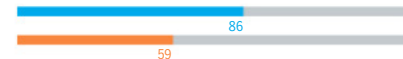
Core Ultra 9 285K



Ryzen 5 9600X



Core Ultra 5 245K



Core Ultra 5 245K

INTEL £279

Baby Arrow

5 Intel changed so many things for its Arrow Lake design that it's hard to convey it all in a few words, but the key takeaway is that the new Core Ultra 200S chips use way less power than its previous CPUs, especially in games. The downside to this is that they're just not as good at gaming as the older processors, such as the Core i5 14600K. It's not a big performance gap but you don't expect a new CPU to be slower than those it's replacing.

Another important change in the chip architecture is the removal of Hyper-Threading from the P-cores, where each core

could handle two threads. To make up for this, Intel seriously improved its E-cores and in content creation, 14 Arrow Lake threads are just as good as 20 Raptor Lake threads.

The Ultra 5 245K's performance isn't consistent but as it's completely new, it might get better with software updates over time. If you take the gamble and buy one, at least you won't need a massive cooler to shift its heat.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Low power
- Handy for content creation
- Slower than competition

SPECS CORES: 6P+8E / THREADS: 14 / BASE CLOCK: 4.2 GHz (P-CORE) / BOOST CLOCK: 5.2 GHz (P-CORE) / L3 CACHE: 26 MB / TDP: 125 W / SOCKET: LGA1851

Core Ultra 9 285K

INTEL £549

Grown-up Arrow

6 Intel's Core Ultra 9 285K, a fully enabled Arrow Lake chip, shares the same drawbacks as the cut-down 245K. Its performance is inconsistent and in games, it's readily beaten by older and cheaper processors. For a flagship model, that hardly seems like an incentive to buy one. However, those 24 threads are good in content creation workloads, though it does depend on the application. The Ryzen 9 9950X is better overall and while more expensive, there are more AM5 motherboards around compared to the number of LGA1851 boards for Arrow

Lake. At least Intel has reigned in its historical hunger for energy and the 285K uses almost half the amount of power as the Core i9 14900K does in games. You're not getting cutting-edge performance but you are getting a cooler and quieter PC. Unlike AMD's Zen 5 chips, Intel's new processors do comfortably fully support ultra-fast RAM, such as DDR5-8000, but the gains are generally small and not worth paying extra for.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Low power
- Slower than competition
- Not the best value

SPECS CORES: 8P+16E / THREADS: 24 / BASE CLOCK: 3.7 GHz (P-CORE) / BOOST CLOCK: 5.7 GHz (P-CORE) / L3 CACHE: 40 MB / TDP: 25 W / SOCKET: LGA1851

PIXEL PUSHERS

When was the last game worth upgrading your PC for?

Short answer: it was supposed to be *Cyberpunk*, wasn't it? The last vestige of that great 'I'm going to buy a new graphics card for this!' tradition lay in CD Projekt's hands, along with the collective expectations of several million unreasonably excited RPG fans, and it fumbled it. It's a wonderful experience now, of course, but at the time V's arrival felt like a slow-mo slap in the cheek with an unnecessarily reflective glove.

But asking that question – the last game that felt like one of those moments where we all went out and upgraded our PCs to meet its specs and experience it at its best – reveals something deeper about how our culture's changed. Or been changed. Because it's not generally about the games any more, is it? It's about the arrival of the graphics cards themselves. That's what lights a fire under us to buy one, and that represents a complete inversion of the relationship, which began with us being so excited about how a new piece of software utilised the advantages of new graphics chips that we went and bought the chip. Slowly that flipped, and now we're so wowed by abstract specs and benchmarks that we make an upgrade purely for the theoretical benefits it'll bestow on us across all the games we play.

Can we blame that on *Cyberpunk 2077*'s botched launch? Some particularly unforgiving ray tracing

enthusiasts probably do. But in truth the inversion had already taken place before we took to the streets of medium settings Night City at 18fps. Many factors have conspired against the must-upgrade new PC game.

LAW BREAKERS

First we broke Moore's law. The sacrosanct computing principle that the number of transistors on an integrated circuit doubles every two years turned out to be missing the addendum: 'until about 2010'. Since that means PC hardware hasn't been getting significantly more powerful every 24 months, developers have had to work with the hardware we actually own. Plus consoles.

Ah, yes. That. PC software piracy plays a role here too. Whereas once the likes of Cevat Yerli and his merry men were willing to take a massive financial punt on an initially PC-only release like *Crysis*, the rampant torrenting of the '00s eventually made studios far more risk-averse and multiplatform-inclined. Which means the hardware ceiling of a given game is as low as the least powerful console it's being released on. Which means: not very many 'wow' moments in PC gaming. The slow pace of visual fidelity improvement should have made the landmark PC releases even more recognisable, culturally memorable and craterous in impact, but *The Witcher 3*s and *Metro Exodus* (Exodi?) were arriving in smaller numbers.



War and PCIe

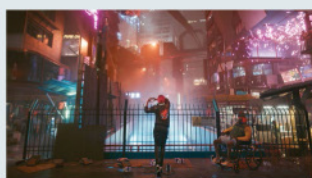
The flipside of this inverse relationship between visual fidelity games and new GPUs? Our systems are usually overqualified for the task at hand today, which means less scrabbling around at sub-par frame rates, and more actively searching for the titles that'll make the most of our specs. Since most of us play at 1080p according to Steam and use Nvidia RTX 3 or 4-series GPUs, it's rare to find a game we'll struggle to run, at least at low or medium presets. *Black Ops 6* only needs a GTX 960 to pass minimum specs.



FAR LEFT: *TF2*, a rare example of a live service game that looked genuinely jaw-dropping at launch.

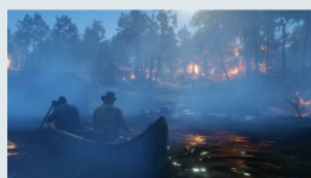
LEFT: Thanks for keeping the 'tomorrow's graphics, today' tradition alive, *STALKER 2*.

RESPECT THE SPECS *Four games you build a new rig to honour*



CYBERPUNK 2077

Nobody had gone this hard on ray tracing before. It was a chance to see what the tech could actually do in real time.



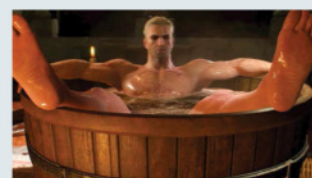
RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

An example of a game being so good, you don't want to compromise on a millimetre of fidelity.



METRO EXODUS

Light and shade were the theme here. Shadows and global illumination effects such as you'd never seen before.



THE WITCHER 3

Ah, Hairworks. We hardly knew you. Fortunately Geralt's beauty was more than follicle-deep.

Why? Because they were getting exponentially expensive to create, at least up at the triple-A end, and huge budgets were looking less like reliable indicators of market penetration. *Too Human* and *APB: All Points Bulletin* were reportedly spending as much as \$100m to attract five minutes of relevance. *Mass Effect Andromeda's* estimated budget sat around the same mark. *Marvel's Avengers* cost \$170m, according to analyst estimates. Who'd have the stomach to bankroll the kind of project that would set a new high tide mark for PC graphics after looking at those figures and their accompanying sales numbers?

The odd release does still manage to force itself into being. Wise old hands like Remedy can make *Alan Wake II* simultaneously the weirdest and most esoteric release of 2023, a mainstream hit, and a jamboree of gorgeous visuals powered by techniques we've seldom seen before. If you're looking for a reason to buy a 4090, that game is as compelling as you'll find.

Maybe a detective game that begins by having you control a nude overweight man through a forest is the answer, then. Maybe *Alan Wake II* was the last game that made an inarguable case for an upgrade. But even the combined power of *Twin Peaks*, Finnish janitors and mind palaces can't completely rewrite the status quo, because there's another enemy of the upgrade-fuel PC release yet to be uttered: live service.

STUCK IN TIME

Cue a darkening of the skies and the scattering of nearby wildlife. Purists hate live service games – not

unreasonably – because they charge us repeatedly for having the same experience over and over again, instead of asking us to pay once for a sequence of new and bespoke thrills. They have their merits, obviously, but visual bamboozlement is not one of them.

Because live service devs want the biggest possible audience to play their games. And keep playing them. That means low minimum requirements and multiplatform releases. It's very hard to make such a title look great, and arguably Valve is the only studio to pull it off in *Team Fortress 2*. Those silhouettes. That art style. The lighting. *TF2* would have been a new build prompter, only it turned out the recommended specs were pretty reasonable and your existing PC could probably run it just fine.

There's only one Valve, though. Elsewhere, *Overwatch 2* looks identical to 2016's *Overwatch*. *Apex*

Legends is the most 2019 sight you've ever seen. *Sea of Thieves* does its best with those rolling waves, but nobody's rushing out for a liquid cooler on its account. Live service just isn't compatible with the needle-shifting, slightly elitist principle of showing aspirationally high graphics that you have to pay your entry for.

So how's the horizon looking? Well, *Unrecord* might prompt an upgrade or two, if it ever materialises. Sony's growing tradition of releasing incredible ports of its PS5 exclusives will probably help. But now *STALKER 2's* come and gone, the old-world version of a new graphics card game doesn't have an obvious poster child. ■

Phil Iwanik

ALAN WAKE II WAS THE LAST GAME THAT MADE A CASE FOR AN UPGRADE

IT'S HIT THE FAN

The mistakes every PC gamer has made during an upgrade project

It's an odd rite of passage, when you think about it. You might have 10,000 hours in *Dwarf Fortress*. You might have a favourite DPI. You might even be able to name every 90% PCG review back to the '90s, including the mad ones like *Braveheart*. But on some level, you only reach a certain level of enthusiast cred once you've wilfully dismantled the box that makes your games happen, and then had a guess at how to put it all back together again, but this time with a new thing inside it.

An endeavour that's equally fraught with peril and rich with payoff, and which there's no adequate preparation for, no matter how many hours of Linus you watch beforehand. Learning how to build or upgrade a PC is a learn-on-the-job undertaking, and 'learning' here is basically a euphemism for 'hearing a sickening crunch and realising the RAM doesn't go in that way'.

It soon becomes second nature, and once it does we forget how baffling the innards of a mid-tower desktop look to a newcomer. But there's a unifying quality to botched builds, a shared failure that unites us all who sail the good ship RGB. Let's forge those bonds now by divulging the shameful, careless, expensive and heartbreaking things we've all done during an upgrade. No laughing, this is a safe space.

FORGOT THE THERMAL PASTE

Hey now, you said you wouldn't laugh. Here's the thing: no warning light goes off when you attach a cooler directly onto the smooth, delicately milled surface of an immaculate CPU chip. There's no menu popup reminder or BIOS beep. At least, not until your Core i9 reaches temperatures equivalent to a car bonnet in Death Valley at noon in mid-August. Only then, panicking like a pilot trying to decipher all the warning

sounds, do you remember: ah, balls. The thermal paste. There it is, look. An untouched syringe of Arctic Silver 5 on your desk next to all the spare PSU cables and the motherboard manual. All that's left to do now is turn off your PC immediately with a sweaty index finger, dismantle the cooler – and the RAM modules, depending on clearance – and try not to think about how many years you took off your CPU's lifespan in that one sickening boot. Like Icarus, your chip flew too close to the sun. Unlike Icarus, it now sits under a fastidiously smeared layer of grey slime.

LIKE ICARUS, YOUR CHIP FLEW TOO CLOSE TO THE SUN

motherboard. Just like you always do.

Just like everybody always does. Because in this age, when we can ask AI to paint a masterpiece and almost get cars to drive themselves, hooking up your case to your motherboard is still a matter of matching six to eight tiny, identical, unlabelled one-pin connectors to a matrix of mystery that looks just *slightly* different than the diagram in your motherboard manual.

DROPPED A SCREW BEHIND THE BOARD

Why isn't it turning on? Oh no, has something blown? Actually yes, it has this time, because 45 minutes earlier you dropped a tiny screw into the case and it's rolled between the motherboard and the mounting plate. And it's 2006 in this scenario, so that's enough to utterly destroy your entire PC.

Thank the heavens modern cases and mobo mounts have safeguarded against this. Anyone who lost a motherboard or

CONNECTED WRONG

Why isn't it turning on? Oh no, has something blown? Has the PSU blown, and then shorted every single new component in one surge? Have you just, in one push of a button, turned a max-settings gaming PC into landfill mulch? Oh hang on, no. You've just done the I/O headers wrong on the



PHIL IWANIUK
They used to call roving freelancer Phil Iwaniuk 'the human EMP grenade' back in his PC Format staffer days, when, ironically, electricity had yet to be invented.

ART OF THE DEAL *Four tools that make PC builds infinitely easier*



1 CABLE TIES

It's not just for the aesthetics, either. Keeping PSU cables out of the way improves airflow and minimises dust buildup.



2 ANTISTATIC WRIST STRAP

Do they actually do anything? Yes, something vital: quell your static damage OCD while you're touching precious things.



3 SCREWDRIVER TORCH

Because the mobo mounting screws are tiny, and their fittings are down in a dark cavernous maw. It just makes sense.



4 NOVELTY T-SHIRT

You glance down, and you remember why you're doing this. Because you're the cool skeleton-guy who games.



a whole suite of components to an errant screw will, to this day, check for loose parts whenever they as much as squirt an air can inside their rig.

BENT THE BACKPLATE

A list of the most brittle, fragile materials on Earth: bubbles. Millimetre-thick glass. A high-ranked *Overwatch* player's ego. And right at the top, motherboard backplates. For reasons that remain unclear, since time immemorial manufacturers have been making these using a vaguely spongy plastic sheet stuck onto an aluminium frame with the physical properties of cheese.

To stare at one of these is to slightly misshape it. Worst of all, it requires stern force to actually push your mobo's connectors through them. Nobody has ever done this without damaging it.

BIOS? Cleared. Windows? Booted. Hang on, why isn't that fan light on? Ah, good enough. All the temps look right, and at this point you'd sooner dismantle your car and have a crack at reassembling it than unscrew that PC case panel one more time. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

RIGHT: At least monitors don't make you disassemble them every few months.



BELOW: A needlessly complex pursuit in the modern age.



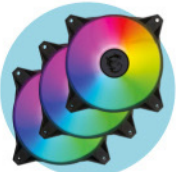
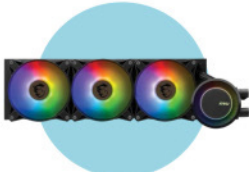
THE BUILD

Business in the front,
party in the back

By Jacob Ridley



TOTAL COST £2,234

1 MOTHERBOARD	 Z790 Project Zero MSI £250 One glance at this motherboard and it looks deceptively normal. But take a second look and you'll see it lacks connectors. Don't worry, it's just the front that's devoid of power or fan headers. All those are stuffed at the back. There are loads of them, but that also means the back of this board looks like something even a bomb-disposal expert would be sweating over. A black motherboard might not benefit as much, or look quite as good, for having fewer cables running across it. But this bare-metal beast? It stands out.		2 CASE	
		 Maestro 700L PZ MSI £360 You need a specially cut case to fit a motherboard with all the connectors on the rear. This Maestro is one such case.		
		3 GRAPHICS CARD		
		 4070 Ti Super Gaming X Slim MSI £860 You can't opt for half-measures with a windowed case and vertical GPU.		
		4 PROCESSOR		
		 Core i7 14700K Intel £324 We're stuck with Intel's 14th Gen with Back-Connect boards right now. This 14700K is a sensible option.		
9 FANS	8 COOLER	7 POWER SUPPLY	6 SSD	5 MEMORY
 MPG F120 ARGB MSI £53 With ten fans inside this machine, I struggled to make it look neat and tidy. Thankfully it's all hidden in the back.	 MPG CoreLiquid E360 MSI £85 Big cooling with RGB flair doesn't have to cost a fortune these days, as evidenced here by this 360mm loop.	 MAG A850GL PCIE5 MSI £81 We don't need a special PSU, as all except the GPU power cable is hidden around the back. Smart.	 Rocket 4 Plus 2 TB Sabrent £135 A PCIe 4.0 SSD with reliable performance that we've used over and over again for benchmarking.	 Pro DDR5-5600 32 GB Crucial £86 I've opted for some 'blend into the background' sticks from Crucial here – fast but nothing too special.

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

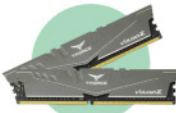
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,010

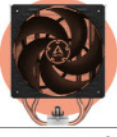
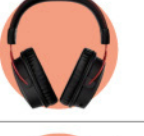
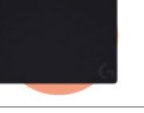
MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £112 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £170 With ten cores, six of them the Performance kind, this Raptor Lake Core i5 is fantastic value and a great all-rounder.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 7600 AMD £249 AMD delivers what we need for 1080p gaming at a solid price. AMD claims it'll do over 350fps in <i>Rocket League</i> , which is a lot.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £36 8 GB of RAM is simply not enough these days, but 16 GB of speedy DDR4 is much more like it.
POWER SUPPLY		RM650 80 Plus Corsair £80 A great power supply is a must, and Corsair builds some reliable workhorses. This one's a good balance of price and power.
SSD		SN770 1 TB Western Digital £60 It's time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive, even for a budget PC. You'll appreciate the extra speed and fast boot times.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Mobiuz EX240 BenQ £132 This BenQ is proof you can buy a genuinely excellent 24in 1080p gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: a hot-swappable USB mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		G203 Logitech £24 A classic shape and 8,000 DPI optical sensor delivered in a sleek shell, this wired mouse fits all hand sizes and grips.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £50 Corsair's budget wired cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.
MOUSE PAD		MM100 Corsair £10 A simple black rectangle that can make a world of difference over no-name models, and it's almost as cheap, too.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,526

MOTHERBOARD		TUF Gaming B650-E Asus £170 A reliable motherboard with plenty of frills, including Wi-Fi 6E, 2.5Gb Ethernet, PCIe 5.0 for the SSD and USB-C on the back.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 7700X AMD £244 For the longevity offered by the AM5 socket, we're going for AMD's excellent eight-core Ryzen 7.
GRAPHICS CARD		RX 7700 XT AMD £370 If you can spare the extra cash, the RX 7800 XT is a tantalising upgrade. Nevertheless, we'll opt for AMD's cheaper card here.
COOLER		Freezer 36 Arctic £24 It's cheap yet effective – you can't ask for more than that. With two fans and four heatpipes, it'll go at up to 1,800 rpm.
MEMORY		Viper Venom DDR5-5600 16 GB Patriot £59 It might not have fancy RGB lighting, but this Patriot RAM certainly has the speed you need for less.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 750W Be Quiet! £104 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with PCIe 5.0 connectivity. At 750W, there's room for a GPU upgrade too.
SSD		NM790 1TB Lexar £70 The Lexar proves you can, sometimes, have it all: blazing speeds, cool operation and a great price.
CASE		H7 NZXT £100 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		PXC277 Advanced Pixio £210 The price of this Pixio, considering the 1440p resolution and 165 Hz refresh rate, is quite something.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V2 Razer £40 This Razer mouse is a superb companion for competitive gaming without breaking the bank.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £60 We're still not over the awesome audio quality and excellent comfort of the HyperX Cloud Alpha.
MOUSE PAD		G440 Logitech £20 This low-friction hard-top mouse pad with minimal branding offers the smoothest of glides for a reasonable price.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£5,904

MOTHERBOARD		MEG X670E Ace MSI £700 There are cheaper X670 boards than this, but we're going extreme and this is one of the most fully featured around.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 9800X3D AMD £450 The upcoming Zen 5 top-end X3D models will have more cores, but for gaming this is the bee's knees.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 4090 Nvidia £1,699 The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.
COOLER		Galahad II Trinity 360 Lian Li £134 Lian Li's Galahad is all about pure liquid cooling performance and it delivers this flawlessly.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB) G.Skill £115 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1000 Seasonic £340 An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.
BOOT DRIVE		NM790 4 TB Lexar £250 With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.
MOUSE PAD		Firefly V2 Pro Razer £100 Do you need an RGB mouse mat? If it makes you feel any better it's excellent for flick shots.
CASE		5000D Corsair £139 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM Asus £1,349 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		ROG Strix Scope II 96 Wireless Asus £190 We're keyboard snobs, and we can say with confidence that this full-sized Asus board is about as good as it gets.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V3 Pro Razer £118 This is the best gaming mouse in our opinion, made better by an incredibly lightweight frame.
HEADSET		Maxwell Audeze £320 Planar magnetic drivers make this headset pure heaven for audio fans. And everyone else, to be honest.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“An unforgettable experience that leaves you lying awake at night”

I thought I'd hung up my hat and pistol, but **RED DEAD REDEMPTION** changed that

I was one of those people who played *Red Dead Redemption 2* before the first. In hindsight, it feels wrong, but now I've got to experience the chronological order of my favourite western adventure, I'm glad I waited. Going from playing as heartwarming Arthur Morgan alongside the Van der Linde Gang to playing as the solo, rather gritty John Marston driven by nothing but anger was certainly a change of pace. But going into the game fuelled by my already existing knowledge of the characters I was inevitably going to hunt down to kill only made the game more enthralling to play for the first time.

It feels like a tale as old as time, given *Red Dead Redemption* released 14 years ago now. But as the opening

KARA PHILLIPS



THIS MONTH
Still galloping around trying to find my place in New Austin.

ALSO PLAYED
The Outlast Trials

notes of Born Unto Trouble welcomed me back to the dusty landscape of Blackwater, I felt like I was being greeted by an old friend. There's something about the world of *Red Dead Redemption* that sunk its hooks into me in a way that I haven't experienced in a hot minute, which only made it easier for me to slip back into character the second I was reintroduced to John. Sure, the hundreds of hours I poured into the second game helped, and before I knew it I was on horseback again and hunting down gang members.

TOP: Filled with moments that genuinely make you feel cool.

BARELY A GUNSLINGER

There's something incredibly humbling about having to re-learn skills you've spent hours using in the past. If you'd watched my first few hours with weapons in *Red Dead* you'd undoubtedly question if I've ever even played a game that requires handling a gun. My aim was so poor I genuinely questioned what had happened between Valentine and New Austin to make me further from the fastest gunslinger in the west. Thankfully after a while it all came flooding back to me and I was landing more precise shots rather than aimlessly

MY AIM WAS SO POOR I GENUINELY QUESTIONED WHAT HAD HAPPENED



firing bullets into whatever vaguely moved in the distance.

But that's all part of it. There's so much to learn in *Red Dead Redemption*, whether that's about the protagonist or the world, or even how to use a gun if you're like me. And it all goes into creating an unforgettable experience that leaves you lying awake at night wondering where your horse will take you which still holds up 14 years later. In fact you immerse yourself so deeply into the boots of a cowboy you genuinely think you'd be able to jump on the back of a horse, gallop across the plains and annihilate anyone that stops you from doing what you think is right, or at least that's how I felt playing through it.

Sure, at first it was a challenge to go from the beautifully crisp world of *Red Dead 2* to the slightly skewed predecessor, but it's an adventure worth embarking on especially now it's slightly more polished on PC. It's nowhere near as photorealistic, and one of the only reasons I found the characters so compelling was probably because I already knew their side of the story. But I wouldn't change it for the world, and it's safe to say that *Red Dead Redemption* has made a cowboy out of me. ■



“The rat swarm teleports to the bar”

Leading a rodent plague through **STALKER 2**

▶ ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Battled *STALKER 2*'s deadliest anomaly, the uberjank.

ALSO PLAYED
Redneck Rampage, South Park: The Fractured But Whole

Creeping through woods, AK47 rifle locked and loaded, I find the small bunker. Inside a hole in the floor leads down to an underground room filled with sewage, detritus and the body of a fallen stalker. There's a stash down there, too, and I need to loot it.

I drop into the hole, my boots landing into radioactive waste. After looting what I can from the stash and the fallen stalker, I then ponder the key question that I probably should have asked myself before dropping into the hole – how do I get back out?

There's no ladder or way back up, so I have to venture through the one narrow passageway leading out of the room, which disappears into darkness. I flick my flashlight on and creep forward. I progress down the tight corridor, expecting an invisible Zone horror to ambush me any second. However, nothing happens.

Well, nothing happens until I reach a long chamber at the end of the corridor. As it is then that I first hear the approaching swarm on the edge of my hearing.

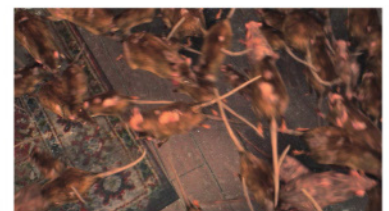
LIKE A RAT OUT OF HELL

Suddenly, a massive rat swarm pours forth. I blaze the assault rifle but it's no good, there's too many, and soon I'm being gnawed on. I quickly run behind a pillar and down the side of the chamber, spying a ladder.

With a cacophony of claws and scurrying approaching my rear, I drop a grenade and spring forwards towards the ladder, grabbing it and hauling myself up as the detonation rings out in the dark.

By the time I've got to the surface the cacophony has faded away. Returning to the nearby village that my fellow stalkers and I are operating out of, I go to the bar for a well-earned drink. It is only then, though, that I hear the swarm once more. Suddenly, out of nowhere, the entire rat swarm teleports into the bar.

Before I can freak out fully, though, it becomes apparent that the rat swarm is now not outputting any damage, with one of *STALKER 2*'s uberjank bugs somehow tying the swarm to me outside of their scripted stomping ground. And now they follow me everywhere. I'm the Pied Piper now. ■



“I just don’t need to spend a tenner to dress up as Rocket Raccoon”

Running wild and reminiscing in **FALL GUYS**

Having written about videogames for coming up to a decade, I’d love to be able to state that there have been hundreds of games that I’ve predicted would make it big. In reality, there’s a handful I can point to. One of them was *Fall Guys*.

A once wonderful distraction to a global pandemic that embodied the best parts of Takeshi’s Castle, the platforming battle royale has grown from 25 minigames to upwards of 80. After being hooked for the first year, I’ve found the urge to return to the colourful world where adorable Beans vie for a golden crown.

Before launch, I had the pleasure of attending PAX Aus in Melbourne, Australia. It was here on a bustling show floor that I encountered *Fall Guys* for the very first time. The idea was as ingenious then as it is today. That was on full display with big queues forming throughout the convention centre. Following a blitz of games that eventually made it into the full release, I somehow triumphed against the 20 or so other competitors, being awarded a real-life

▶ MATT POSKITT



THIS MONTH
Avoiding Epic’s monetisation and reclaiming my crown.

ALSO PLAYED
Shadow X Sonic Generations

foam crown that was gloriously presented upon my head.

Fast-forward to Epic Games acquiring the small British studio behind the ginormous hit, Mediatonic, going free-to-play and reaching more than 50 million players by 2022, it was hard to argue that it wasn’t deserved.

FORTNITE FORMULA

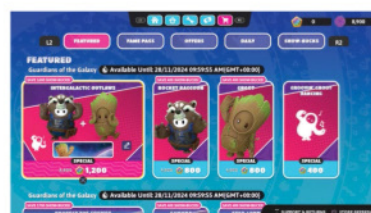
Now returning to *Fall Guys* in 2024, it’s a slightly different experience. There’s the same sense of familiarity from the minigames I played down under. There’s the same comfort in

knowing that the next ten minutes are likely to afford me some joy. But perhaps... a sense of being overwhelmed too? The reasoning? The *Fortnite* formula, whose influence is as clear as daylight: a battle pass, too many currencies and an abundance of Disney-licensed IP.

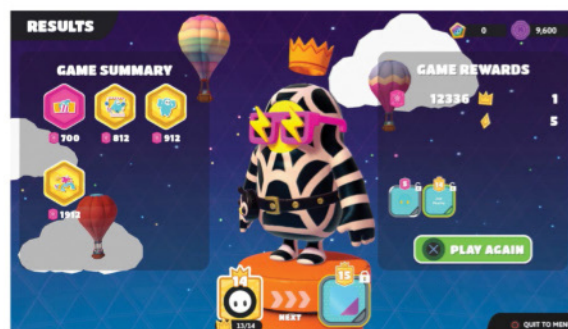
I love *Guardians of the Galaxy*. I just don’t need to spend a tenner to dress up as Rocket Raccoon. My concern is that the partnerships and shiny new skins take precedence over the quality of the levels. That came to fruition as soon as I noticed the Classic Games tab where all the standouts from the first year or so live. Jump Club. Door Dash. Roll Off. The Whirlygig. Tip Tow. Hex-A-Gone. Slime Climb. Fall Mountain. The list goes on.

This isn’t to say there aren’t some fun new additions. Slide n’ Smash, where players throw themselves down a water slide in an attempt to break through as many walls as they can along the way, is a delight. Meanwhile, Full Tilt offers beautiful chaos as 40 clumsy beans leap over oversized 360-degree see-saws. It’s just these levels are few and far between. ■

THE BATTLE ROYALE HAS GROWN FROM 25 MINIGAMES TO UPWARDS OF 80



FAR LEFT: The *Fortnite*-style monetisation can feel overwhelming.



BELOW: Winning never looked so good.



“The raid is done in such a way that you still feel a connection to it”

Reliving the past in **FINAL FANTASY XIV** patch 7.1

The first major patch since *Dawntrail*'s launch started setting the tone for what's to come for the next two years with some tantalising story revelations and a fight with an incredibly angry bunny, but it was the nods to games of the past that caught my attention.

Alongside patch 7.1's additional story, new dungeon and extreme fight came the start of a new 24-man raid series based on the first *Final Fantasy* MMO – *FFXI*. It's the one *Final Fantasy* game I've never tried – having good internet access or access to something that could run it never seemed to line up for me at a point where I had the time to play it. It also seemed intimidating to sign up for let alone get into. Thankfully *FFXIV* has given players a chance to take a little vacation to Vana'diel in a whirlwind of nods to friends, enemies and locations from the game.

Even when you don't have the same frame of reference of the people that were there at the time, the raid is

DANIELLA LUCAS



THIS MONTH
Had nightmarish flashbacks to Watership Down.

ALSO PLAYED
Dragon Quest III HD-2D Remake, *Stardew Valley*

done in such a way that you still feel a connection to it. The surges of old music, the flashbacks to screenshots of the world and the effort that's gone into recreating segments of it. The piece of the city Jueno that you get to explore at your own pace is filled with shadows of players trying to find parties and sell their wares.

MMO TIME

Inspired by that lookback at *Final Fantasy*'s MMO origins, I decided to create a little nostalgia tour of my

own within *FFXIV* by revisiting the places I first saw as a wee sprout 11 years ago. As well as all of the lovely raids etc, 7.1 also updated a lot of the 2.X areas from *A Realm Reborn*. They've given them a graphical overhaul that brings them more in line with the latest *Dawntrail* expansion. Paths and rugs have loads more details, more grass appears in fields and shops feel like they're brimming with merchandise.

I first took a stroll down the main road in Ul'Dah – the city I started in as a Monk, feeling the newly freshened up cobbles beneath my feet before teleporting over to Horizon. The familiar walk through the Footfalls to has received the biggest makeover. And the ruin of The Silent King, which was once flat and dusty, is now covered in moss and shadows that make it look like you could feel the roughness of the stone beneath it.

Stopping to take in how much of an impact all of those little changes have on the world makes me appreciate all of the new adventures ahead of us even more. New players don't know how good they have it. ■

SHADOWS OF PLAYERS TRYING TO FIND PARTIES AND SELL THEIR WARES



SYNERGY

I've mastered Synergy's newest sandbox map, The Furnace. *By Elie Gould*

I enjoy troublesome challenges, that's why I play city-building sims in which I try to make life as good as possible for people who end up hating me. So you can imagine my delight when I heard that one of Leikir Studios' recent updates for the eco-city building sim *Synergy* had introduced a new troublesome sandbox map: The Furnace.

Despite its friendly appearance, *Synergy* isn't a game that you should take lightly, even at the best of times. You start off every game with a group of survivors who were forced to flee their homes after their civilisation collapsed under the pressure of a deteriorating climate. But, where you end up isn't in a much better state, so you have to work carefully to expand your city while also taking care of the local environment.

Many difficult obstacles stand in your way, like famine, drought, sunstroke that has the potential to kill citizens in dry seasons, invasive plant species and soil health, to name a few. But no matter how many issues came up, I never felt like growing my city in *Synergy* was an impossible task. I managed to house hundreds of people and explore the far corners of the map to gather more resources

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 21, 2024

DEVELOPER
Leikir Studio

PUBLISHER
Goblinz Publishing

LINK
goblinzstudio.com

and information with little to no problems popping up.

Sadly, after dropping into The Furnace, I discovered that I'm not the management whizz I once thought I was; it turns out that I just wasn't playing on a high enough difficulty level.

REALITY CHECK

This is where The Furnace comes in, a new sandbox map that was introduced in update v0.3. Located next to the Mother River near two small oases, the few groves present can only shelter a small group of survivors. For the first time in *Synergy*, I found that my city was growing slowly. Because I've been tinkering around with this game for a while now, I knew what all the buildings were and where I needed them, as well as how to prioritise industrial production and scientific research. But even still, it took more effort than usual to start pushing even 50 inhabitants.

The Furnace is predominately full of just sand, rock and heat, and any

natural resource found is pretty limited and needs extra care to prosper and grow. Next to my primary settlement lies five rocky figs, which can be harvested for vegetables if you rip them out. But with so few of them around and no guarantee of how quickly they'd grow back, I thought it was best to look elsewhere for food. This landed me on the giant fungus, an invasive and quickly growing plant species that I could rip out to make mushroom soup.

It may not be a culinary masterpiece, but there was enough to harvest consistently for the first few cycles to keep my population well-fed until I could use scientific

A LACK OF RESOURCES AFFECTS MORE THAN FOOD SUPPLY

research to find a new food source. A lack of resources affects more than just food supply; you also have fewer building materials. Citizens in *Synergy* will only have children if there's space to do so, meaning you need to supply more adequate housing than is currently needed if you want your population to grow. You can't just cut trees and harvest rock whenever you want to. Every decision to prune or change the environment has to be made with a considerable amount of forethought; otherwise, you'll find yourself with nothing but sand later on in the game.

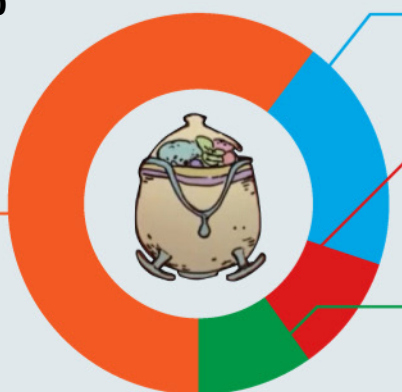
With all of that in mind, it's not been easy growing a utopia in The Furnace. I second-guess every decision I make, and every time I have to cut down a tree, I break into a cold sweat, but like I said before, I'm not afraid of a challenge. The few victories I have achieved, like setting up industrial, cultural and scientific districts or finally creating a stable food production, have tasted all the sweeter because of how tricky this map has been.

I'm not claiming to have mastered The Furnace, at least not yet. But despite the harsh environment, low resources, and low population, I've managed to transform this map into a home and perhaps even the skeleton of a future utopia. ■

GRUB'S UP

This week's five-star menu is...

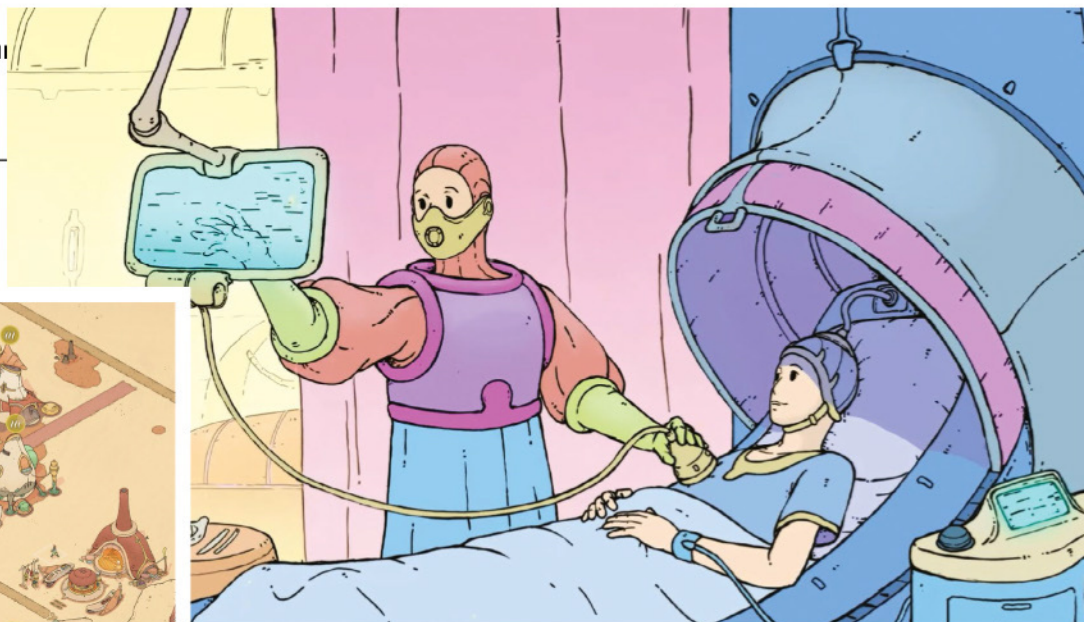
60% A BERRY I FOUND ON THE FLOOR
It's a little dusty, but it'll get us through the dry season.



20% OLD MUSHROOM SOUP
A staple as it was all that I could find for a few cycles.

10% ROUGH OATMEAL
Not particularly nutritious, but it's a good source of fibre.

10% CARBON BULBS
Veg that can only be harvested with care from a Cactus Shrub.



FAR LEFT: It's getting way too hot in here.

BELOW: Expanding outside of my comfort zone (the city limits).





HALF-LIFE 2: SWELTER

Swelter is a Resistance romp through Half-Life 2's sun-scorched Kazakhstan. *By Dominic Tarason*

Slightly bookish aesthetics aside, Gordon Freeman is a pretty cool guy. Theoretical physicist turned action hero at the drop of an HEV suit's (clearly optional) hat. Unforeseen circumstances and the occasional military ambush aside, he's a smooth operator. The guy you're playing as in *Swelter*... isn't, as his graceless dismount from a moving train in the mod's intro highlights, sending him tumbling head-first into a lamppost. Welcome to City 545, located somewhere in central Asia, formerly Kazakhstan. You've got a job to do, and you're clearly not the best man they could have sent.

Available on Steam to anyone who already owns *Half-Life 2* and its expansions, *Swelter* is a self-contained fangame that kinda

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
June 23rd, 2023

DEVELOPER
DE Development Team

PUBLISHER
Valve

LINK
shorturl.at/roXHs

stretches the definition of being a mere 'mod'. This is a full, professionally produced *Half-Life 2* campaign, albeit with a truncated run-time and with a less professional voice cast. Still, it's an astounding production for the small mod crew that previously produced the solid winter-themed *Snowdrop Escape*, also available on Steam.

QUARTER-LIFE

Swelter may not be a huge campaign – only a handful of hours long for experienced players – but it crams a lot of set pieces into that timeframe. One moment you're scrambling around, using an improvised



TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The resistance's hand-me-downs



AK-47

The classic Soviet workhorse, the rifle of choice of freedom fighters worldwide.



GRENADE LAUNCHER

Low-tech, but satisfying and effective – aim high and cross your fingers.



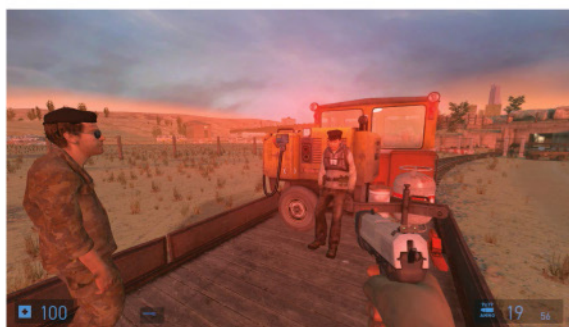
BOLT-ACTION SNIPER

Probably nearly a hundred years old, but still puts holes in heads.



A BIG MAGNET

No zero-point energy for you. Just a big magnet rigged to a battery.



FAR LEFT: It's cooler in VR, but these puzzles work well enough.

TOP: Hit your head? At least you wrote down what to do!



resistance rocket launcher turret to clear out armoured cars, then rushing to refuel a garbage truck, then hook up its tow cables to tear open a Combine wall. Next you're calling out mortar targets and sniping enemies from the rooftops, and then just as you settle into a rhythm you're dragged away to lead the troops' charge on an enemy facility with a lot of destructible scenery.

It feels like playing the greatest hits of *Half-Life* in an abridged, slightly chaotic medley. Not just *Half-Life 2*, but the episodes, and even *Alyx*. Gameplay elements like *HL: Alyx*'s wire-connecting dial puzzles make frequent appearances, as well as a couple new mechanics. You'll be able to check what you're meant to be doing in a little leather-bound dossier, channelling the *Metro* games, and interact with the environment a little more in places, with non-standard interactable objects highlighted with handy markers. A couple times I was left scrabbling around for the right button to press, but for the most part the campaign flew by, day turning to night as your mission progresses, then into daybreak.

If there's one complaint I had to level at *Swelter* is that just as you're getting the hang of one thing, it switches things up again. Great if you're impatient and want to hammer through a dozen set-pieces, but there's barely time to sit and admire just how much detail went into these environments and how many custom textures that had to be produced for it. While there's some echoes of City 17 here thanks to *Half-Life 2*'s consistent art direction, the architecture feels subtly different – worn-down former soviet structures, rusted old Russian vehicles, heavy metal gates adorned with faded red stars. There's a real sense of history to the environments you're blasting your way through.

DISCOUNT RAMBO

The rusty post-Soviet surplus aesthetic carries over to the gear you'll be using. While much of the time you'll be using the stock Combine SMG and shotgun (albeit with the option to aim down the sights like a regular human being, rather than firing pinpoint from the hip like Gordon), there's an old AK-47 and a couple of dusty old wooden-stocked bolt-action sniper

rifles for longer-range combat. For the required-by-law semi-open driving segment, you'll also be equipped with a crappier, improvised substitute for Gordon's powerful gravity gun; a powerful electromagnet that shoves stuff around well enough, but isn't quite as good.

Honestly, the kinda rough and improvised feel just works here. You don't get yourself an armoured vest capable of using Combine terminals until well into your first major mission and you'll be patching yourself up in combat using syringes from *HL: Alyx*. There's a real sense of desperation in the fighting here, even when you're winning. You're not a science superhero in an orange metal suit, you're some generic NPC in a silly hat. And those wanting to feel even more like a bumbling resistance grunt wildly out of their depth can turn on some extra realism options,



THE KINDA ROUGH AND IMPROVISED FEEL JUST WORKS HERE

such as dropping partially used magazines when reloading.

While not quite as spectacular and bombastic as the previous year's *Entropy Zero 2*, *Swelter* feels like a harrowing, thrilling day in the life of a resistance fighter that seems to survive more through luck than judgment. Even your mission is surprisingly humble; ostensibly a diplomatic mission, with you sent to get in touch with the local anarchist faction and get them back on the same page as Resistance high command. It's petty, it's political, and it's the kind of nonsense you expect them to get up to when they've not got an invincible nerd-warrior to lead them on the front lines.

And lastly, the *Swelter* team have gone all-in on localisation. Not just offering full subtitles and menu text changes, but translating all the text-heavy textures in the game into Korean, Swedish, Ukrainian, Chinese, Japanese, Polish and even native Kazakh. They even rolled out a Vietnamese translation, meaning that people around the world can fall out of a train face-first into a metal pole before becoming a hero. ■



GET STARTED IN

DRAGON AGE: VEILGUARD

Help Rook defeat the evil elven gods. *By Sean Martin*

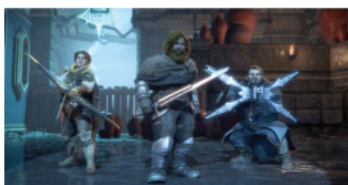
NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Up to you

TIME
20 hours

VITAL LINK

Romance options:
pcgamer.com/games/dragon-age/veilguard-romance-options/



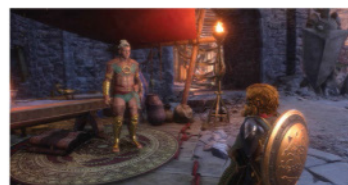
BACK TO BASICS

1 Besides choosing a class to smack around Darkspawn with, your first big choice in *Veilguard* is your background. This determines which of the game's factions you are most closely associated with, and just like your class, it's not something you can change later.



MIRROR OF TRANSFORMATION

2 There is one thing you can change, though, and that's appearance. Once you complete the prologue and find yourself in The Lighthouse, you'll discover the Mirror of Transformation. Activate this decorative device and you can tweak your whole physical appearance.



MONEY TALKS

3 As you fight through ancient ruins and collapsed castles, you'll loot all sorts of valuable items, though their purpose isn't initially clear. You can sell valuables to traders for gold, but they have a second, more important function: faction strength.



FIRM FRIENDS

4 Faction strength helps you upgrade vendors, unlocking new items you can purchase, but its main function is more significant. Bolstering faction strength is tied to *Veilguard*'s endgame and the inevitable confrontation with the elven gods, Ghilan'nain and Elgar'nain.



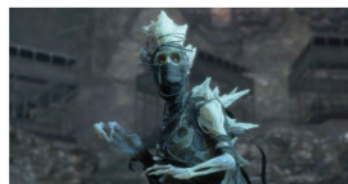
TREASURE HUNTER

5 If you want some extra valuables to hawk, then make sure to keep an eye on Rook's secret treasure radar. You may not have noticed, but when you get close to a big chest of loot, a treasure chest icon minimap will flash.



STAY CLASSY

6 At the start of the game you will have chosen either Warrior, Mage, or Rogue, but it's worth noting that each of these have three specialisms as well. Decide what your combat focus is going to be and then focus on finding and upgrading gear that strengthens it.



LEDGE-ND

7 For when you find yourself facing tough Darkspawn or Venatori, remember that you can smack them off of ledges for an instakill. You won't find these drops in every location, but with the right knockback abilities, you can send foes flying into the great beyond.

HAPPY ENDINGS *Get prepped for the final battle*



1

HEROES

Helping your companions become Heroes of Veilguard prepares them for the final confrontation with the gods, and to do this you'll need to finish each of their companion questlines.

2

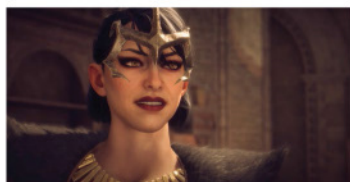
ROOK

Complete sidequests and browse merchants to acquire powerful gear and play around with your ability loadout and dagger runes to make yourself even stronger.

3

FACTIONS

Your choices throughout *Veilguard* affect the game's many factions, as well as completing their faction-based sidequests and strengthening them by selling valuables to merchants.



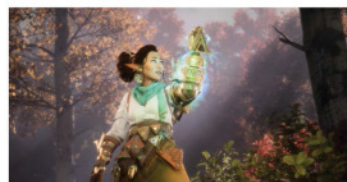
CHATTY BUNCH

8 One way to never miss a companion quest is to talk to your comrades after every main quest you complete. Look for the exclamation points and chat markers below character portraits on the map of The Lighthouse, as these indicate your associates want to have a chinwag.



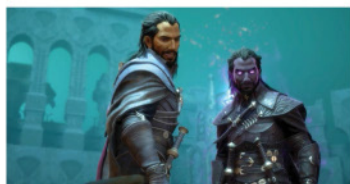
LOVED UP

9 Of course, if you're looking to romance any of *Veilguard*'s cast of heroic weirdos, you'll want to be chatting with them every opportunity you get. Don't be afraid of flirting with a wide variety of characters – romances in the game have clear points of commitment.



SMASH 'EM UP

10 If you're looking to get some extra gold then make sure you're smashing up all the crates you happen across while exploring. Breaking these crates can give you valuables or even materials like hardwood, which you can use to level up faction vendors.



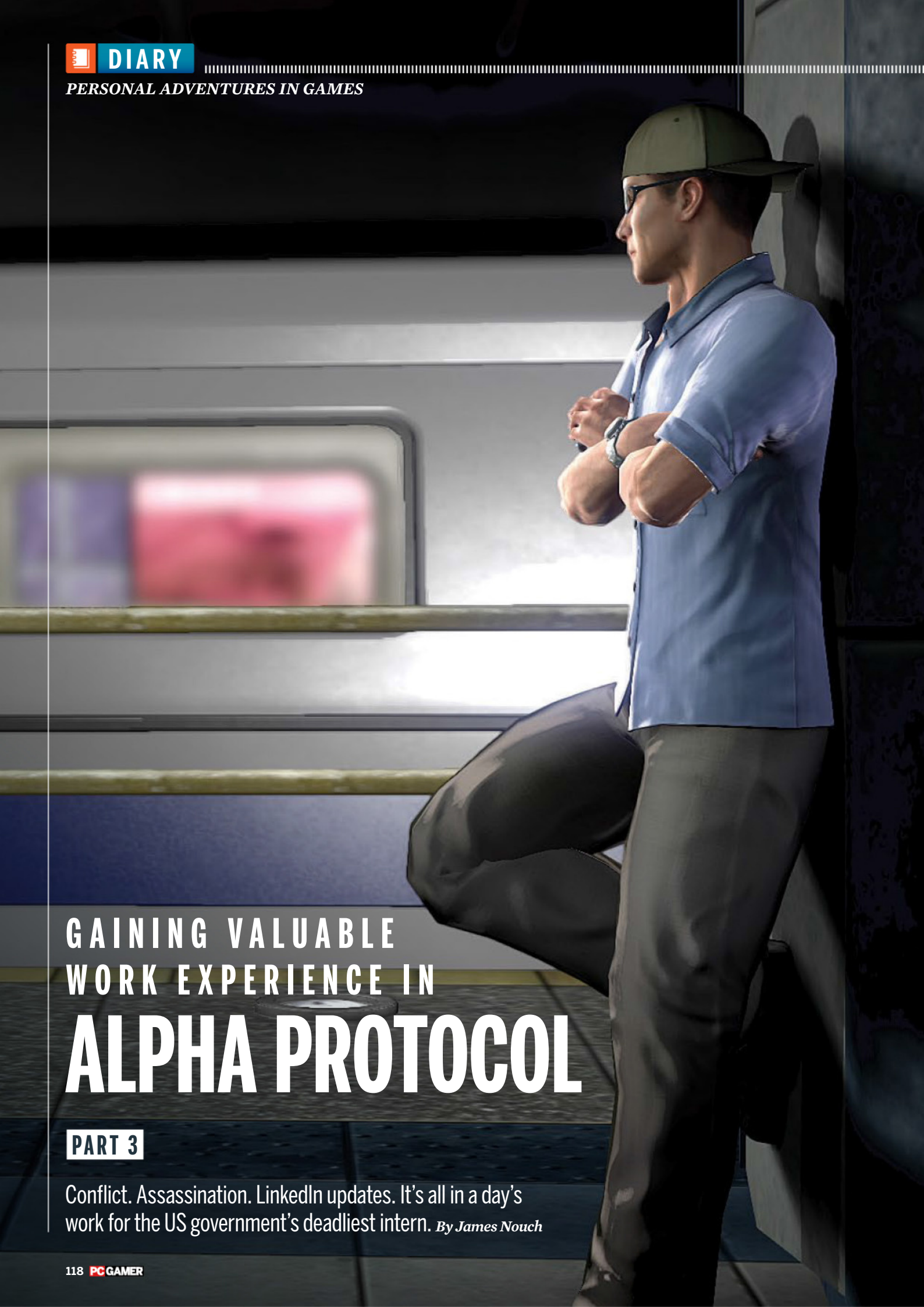
SECOND CHANCE

11 While you can tweak the difficulty in *Veilguard*, one tip for tougher combat is to get some Revival Charges. You can find these listed on gear and, while they're specific to rare accessories, each charge gives you another chance in combat if you get downed.



KNIVES OUT

12 A further way to strengthen yourself in combat is to slot runes into your Lyrum Dagger for buffs. Some of these buffs are active, such as infusing your weapons with fire, while each rune also has a passive effect, boosting damage or duration.

A man in a blue polo shirt, grey trousers, a green baseball cap, and glasses stands on a train platform, leaning against a railing and looking out a train window. The train is blurred in the background, suggesting motion.

GAINING VALUABLE WORK EXPERIENCE IN ALPHA PROTOCOL

PART 3

Conflict. Assassination. LinkedIn updates. It's all in a day's work for the US government's deadliest intern. *By James Nouch*

The Halbech Corporation has brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. Faced with declining profits, the villainous defence contractor and its dead-eyed CEO Henry Leland have been working tirelessly to stoke conflict around the world. In the process, they've armed terrorists, undermined governments, and even framed loveable, hardworking interns for crimes they didn't commit.

Our hero Mikey T has been following their dastardly trail from Saudi Arabia through to Moscow and Rome, pursued all the while by his erstwhile employers at the secret intelligence agency that is Alpha Protocol. Now, fresh intel tells us that Halbech is planning to assassinate Taiwan's president. To uncover more, we'll have to infiltrate a closed gathering of Chinese intelligence agents in Taipei. If we get this right, we'll be one step closer to ensuring that Leland and his lackeys pay for their crimes.

But this is one mission that's too dangerous for an intern to tackle alone. This time, Mikey's working with a ragtag band of specialists in an Ocean's Eleven-style crew. The first member of the Save The World gang is Mina Tang, our handler and occasional sender of inappropriate emails. Next is Scarlet Lake, a hotshot journalist who is surprisingly open to the idea of risking life and limb in order to help a 19-year-old work experience kid steal data from the Chinese government. The final member of our outfit is Steven Heck, a local informant who is either a high-level CIA operative or an unstable fantasist.

The tension mounts as the crew gathers for a pre-mission briefing. Mikey, ever eager to play by the rules, explains that the gathering is taking place in a hotel, so we'll need to be careful to avoid any civilian casualties. Steven is visibly crestfallen. This does not bode well.

THERE WILL BE BLOOD

We've barely taken two steps into the building before Steven starts murdering people. It occurs to me that Mikey could just turn around and leave him to his fate. I eventually have to concede that interns don't usually leave colleagues to die in hotel corridors. What's more, jumping to Steven's aid might one day serve as a good example of a

time Mikey acted as a team player, and you know that kind of question is going to come up in a job interview.

Energised by that thought, Mikey pulls out a pistol and headshots a half dozen guards in a bullet-time blur. As the shell casings bounce off the polished floor, Mikey reflects that this is probably just the kind of thing you need to do if you're going to progress from intern, to paid staff member, to high-flying executive someday. This is what getting ahead in the business world must look like.

As the staccato sounds of gunfire fade, we can begin this 'infiltration' in earnest. Thankfully, Mikey's stealth skills are now indistinguishable from magic. Activating

MIKEY PULLS OUT A PISTOL AND HEADSHOTS GUARDS IN A BULLET-TIME BLUR

the Shadow Operative perk, Mikey turns fully invisible for 20 seconds, during which time he can sprint his way through hotel foyers, pausing only to choke out a guard or two as he passes.

Armed with these supernatural abilities, strolling past the remaining hotel security guards is a breeze. Better yet, my fears that the Chinese intelligence operatives of the NSB will prove in any way resistant to Mikey's reality-bending powers are unfounded. Faster than you can say 'tactical espionage action', Mikey is hacking his way into a laptop that's chock full of state secrets. A few seconds of clickety-clacking later and we have what we came for: the dossier on Omen Deng. This, it seems, is the person that Halbech has hired to assassinate President Ronald Sung. All that's left to do is escape with the data.

And that's when Steven Heck pipes up. Apparently, the NSB has a profile on him and Heck wants us to delete it while we're in the system. This is obviously a terrible idea (we have the data we came for and there's still time to escape undetected) and it's becoming clearer by the second that Steven is nothing more than a murderous tagalong. Nevertheless, Mikey's desperate desire to make friends and abide by his admittedly sketchy understanding

of GDPR best practice kicks in. He dutifully deletes the file, and the hotel is immediately filled with the sound of piercing sirens.

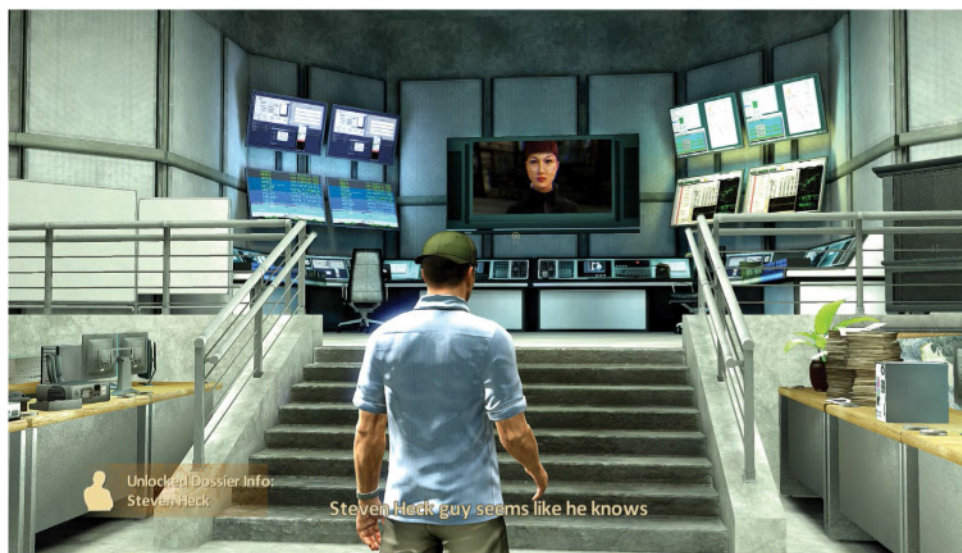
It would be fair to say that escaping the building is a challenge. NSB agents and hotel security are both on high alert, and Mikey's continued lack of any body armour or toughness-based perks mean that we have firmly entered the one-shot-kill portion of the game. As yet another grenade lands at Mikey's feet, I wonder how the president of Taiwan would feel to know that his fate now rests in the trembling, unpaid hands of this well-meaning bumbler.

A SHOT IN THE DARK

President Sung is stood in the open air addressing a crowd of hundreds. He knows that any one of these

THE RULES

1. You're working for exposure. You can't spend any money.
2. Do things by the book. Interns don't get to break the rules.
3. Talk to everyone and be sure to make a good impression.



Unlocked Dossier Info:
Steven Heck

Steven Heck guy seems like he knows

people could be the assassin who has been sent to kill him (he recently received a warning from a polite young American with exquisitely sculpted facial hair) but he took to the stage anyway. High above the stage and the crowds, in the dark corners of Taipei's Memorial Hall, a battle is unfolding. Mikey T may have met his match.

Omen Deng is a master of stealth, able to spew bullets from cover before melting back into the shadows. To make matters worse, he's an expert at close-quarters combat. Fortunately, Mikey's Chainshot ability, which enables him to literally stop time and line up six headshots in a row, gives him one hell of a leg-up. Eventually, our adversary falters and falls, bloodied and defeated.

Because *Alpha Protocol* is written by sociopaths, we're now given the option to execute Omen Deng in cold blood. That isn't really Mikey's style (a case in point: he's still too nervous to use the toilet for anything other than a swift number one during work hours), but he does take the opportunity to press Deng for information on the hit.

And that's when we discover that Deng isn't an assassin after all – he's a double agent working for Taiwanese intelligence! What's more, he thought that Mikey was the assassin. It's farcical – like an episode of *Fawlty Towers* in which Basil and Manuel have a hilarious misunderstanding even though they're both just trying to ensure the continued political stability of Taiwan. Seen in this light, it's a real shame that Mikey and Deng just spent several minutes repeatedly shooting one another in the chest and head for no real reason whatsoever.

Just as Mikey engages his diaphragm to engage in a full-throated chuckle at the absurdity of all this, somebody shoots Ronald Sung. The president collapses at his podium, felled by an unseen sniper's bullet. Mikey winces. This little mishap isn't going to help his job prospects.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

At long last, Mikey is face to face with Henry Leland. The Halbech CEO is the puppet-master who has masterminded every terrible thing that's happened to the world (and, more importantly, to Mikey) in our story so far. Thanks to him, the president of Taiwan has been shot, World War III looms, and America's

BELOW: Choices really do matter in *Alpha Protocol*, and your final mission may vary considerably based on decisions you made much earlier in the game.



SKILLS-BASED CV

Skills Mikey is bringing to his next interview



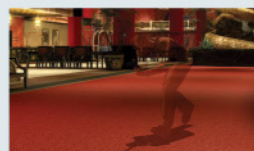
TEAMWORK

Capable of collaborating with others to meet a shared goal. Even with Steven, who was awful.



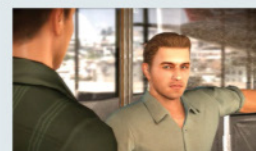
OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

Naturally optimistic, even in the face of challenging and overwhelming circumstances.



TURN INVISIBLE

You know the invisibility cloak from *Harry Potter*? I can do that anytime I want.



UNFAILING POLITENESS

Even when all my colleagues are trying to kill me, I remain professional and composed.

most go-getting intern has been left with no real adult supervision to speak of.

As if Halbech's imminent triumph wasn't bad enough, this entire conversation is only possible because Mikey has handed himself in, surrendering to the Alpha Protocol operatives that have been hunting him. In a just world, Mikey's erstwhile colleagues would have greeted him with open arms and an Employee of the Month certificate. Heads of department would have gathered to welcome him. "Welcome back," Sean Darcy would smile. "We want you to work here, for actual money," Alan Parker would add. "You're like a son to me, and you did a fabulous job with that laminating," agency head Yancy Westridge would say. Instead, in one of the widest gulfs between hoped-for-outcome and disappointing reality that I've ever seen, Mikey is set to be executed.

As our hero struggles to take this all in, Leland smugly recounts the events that have brought us to this point, pausing only to smugly taunt us for our (rare, entirely understandable) missteps or to smugly adjust his nauseating yellow shirt. It comes as something of a shock, therefore, when Leland pauses his self-satisfied narrative to make Mikey an offer. Leland wants to give him a job. At Halbech.

This is everything that Mikey has been working towards. All the unpaid hours he's put in; all the enthusiastic networking he's been doing; all the necks he's snapped because someone vaguely grown-up told him to – it's all been leading up to this moment. He should be elated, but something about Leland's plan to grow rich off the back of all-out global



IN SPITE OF ALL THE NECK-SNAPPING HE IS A SWEET AND PROPER LITTLE YOUNGSTER

thermonuclear war has put a dampener on the occasion. Mikey may be the ultimate people-pleaser, but can he accept a job offer from the shittiest man on the planet?

The answer, it turns out, is that he cannot. Our hero may be a little too eager to please anyone that's in a position of authority (or anyone with a tie, or anyone that he suspects is more than five years older than he is), but in spite of all the neck-snapping he is a sweet and proper little youngster at heart. Leland doesn't like to be refused, and our meeting ends. Mikey is left to await his fate in the very same cell that this playthrough began in.

ENDGAME

There's not really a breezy, lighthearted way to recount this part of Mikey's story. He's escaped confinement and taken out hordes of agency operatives and security staff. He's killed Alan Parker (Alpha Protocol's senior intelligence analyst) before dispatching Sean Darcy (Alpha Protocol field agent and recipient of my inaugural 'most bugged boss fight' award). At some point, he fought a helicopter. It should tell you something about the relentless

intensity of *Alpha Protocol*'s final mission that I can't really remember the context of him blasting a Black Hawk chopper out of the sky.

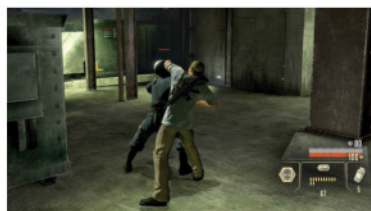
And now, he's face to face with Leland once again. The telltale presence of a health bar at the top of the screen suggests that the time for discussing job offers and relocation packages and contributory pension schemes has, sadly, passed. As he gloats from the top of a convenient parapet, flanked by swarms of Alpha Protocol security, the true extent of Leland's control over the agency is made clear.

Unfortunately for Leland, his enemy is still capable of turning completely bloody invisible when the need arises, and the 20 second time limit on this power is more than sufficient for Mikey to run past the guards, jog up a stairwell, and unleash hell on a certain CEO's head at short range.

Leland is dead, but many questions remain. Will his death be enough to stop Halbech? What happened to Alpha Protocol's chief of operations, Yancy Westridge? And is Mikey going to be able to submit at least some of the expenses he's incurred during several hard weeks of globetrotting espionage?

None of that seems to matter, though, as Mikey exits the Alpha Protocol facility and steps behind the wheel of a conveniently moored motorboat. Explosions roar in the background as he steers it into the sunset. Mikey's taking a break from the corporate world. He's earned it. ■

ABOVE: Mikey's intense specialisation in the stealth and pistol-wielding skills make him almost undetectable to human patrols yet still incredibly conspicuous to cameras and automated turrets.



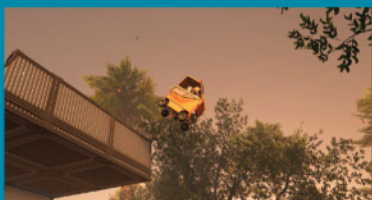


WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

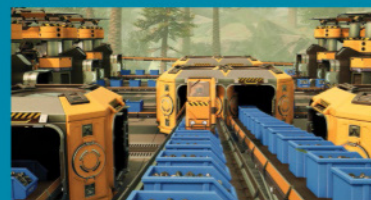
SATISFACTORY'S FACTORY CART

Why build factories when you could be doing sick wheelies? *By Wes Fenlon*



LEFT: Bro!
Nice air bro!!

RIGHT: Just
screwing around.



Satisfactory only looks like it's a videogame about efficiency. It seems to be a game about automating the means of production, of perfectly balancing the inputs and outputs of a dozen, then a hundred, then a thousand machines until they're all producing at maximum performance in a harmonious song of plate-stamping and bolt-threading. This is a complete ruse.

I know it's a ruse because one of the first items added to *Satisfactory*'s AWESOME Shop of optional-yet-vital unlockable items is the Factory Cart. The Factory Cart is a small vehicle that forces your character to essentially bend in half and hunch over to fit inside it – think Mr Bean's car, if Mr Bean were LeBron James' height. As soon as you can access the Factory Cart *Satisfactory* becomes less about efficiency and more about absurdity, because it's impossible not to deploy it from your pocket and drive it around your factory floor with the same recklessness of a child who hasn't yet broken an RC car by driving it into too many table legs. The Factory Cart is indestructible, but you'll probably spend more time toppling over in it or tumbling wheels over roof as soon as you collide with a small incline at 15 miles per hour.

And yet in a game that includes trucks, trains, an all-terrain buggy, a jetpack and an exosuit that greatly increases your running speed – all seemingly more useful vehicular options – the Factory Cart is the best of all of them. Why? Because it's the only one that lets you install a little red siren on the roof that goes

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
September 10, 2024

DEVELOPER
Coffee Stain Studios

PUBLISHER
Coffee Stain

LINK
satisfactorygame.com

CART LIFE

Behold this majestic vehicle

1 SIREN
The cart's key feature, obviously.

2 HINGES
The cart folds up until it's briefcase-sized.



3 WHEELS
Even medium-sized sticks can be rolled over (with enough speed).

4 WINDOW FLAP
Doesn't close. Probably broken.

5 MOTOR
...where the heck did they fit the motor in this thing, anyway?

'wee-woo wee-woo'. *Satisfactory* is not a game about efficiency.

Most of the vehicles and tech upgrades in *Satisfactory* unlock on a realistic, linear path of improvement. Fuel, for example, is at first a somewhat limiting resource for vehicles until you unlock more efficient types of it and easier-to-automate ways to produce it. Cliffs threaten you with deadly fall damage and building vertical factories is

THERE'S A SLICK FEELING TO RUNNING AND JUMPING AROUND A FACTORY FLOOR

tricky until the jetpack comes along. But the Factory Cart turns up its nose at any such sense of progression. It's indestructible, requires no fuel and even makes you immune to radiation while inside it, ideal for doing a little reconnoitring around your nuclear power facilities in the late game. The Factory Cart isn't entirely a joke!

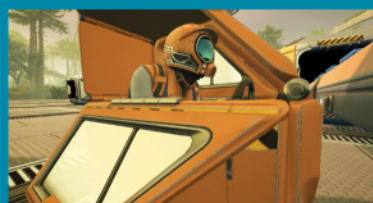
It is mostly a joke, though. I've spent hours laying down foundation pieces across *Satisfactory*'s open world to create miniature race tracks for the Factory Carts. I've built 'skate'

parks with half pipes that I'm pretty sure are only in the game because the developers thought it would be funny to see people drive the Factory Cart around them with all the finesse of a bumper car and less hang time off the top of the pipe than a semi-pro 12-year-old skater (and they were correct – it is funny). The first time I played *Satisfactory* back in 2020, all progress on construction ground to a halt for a day or two while I just goofed around with this silly thing. It's both completely irrelevant to the main thrust of the factory building simulation and, at the same time, a neat encapsulation of what makes *Satisfactory* so different from other games of its type.

HOVER IN A JETPACK

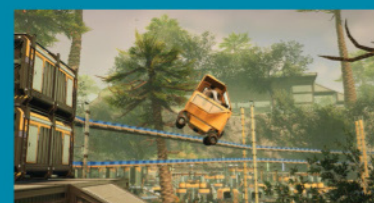
When you're a disembodied mouse cursor placing buildings, as you are in so many factory and automation games, your options for admiring the work you've put into your grand design are limited. You can zoom in or zoom out, but you can't ride along a conveyor belt, hop into the engine car of a train, hover in a jetpack over multiple three dimensional floors of a skyscraper you assembled from dirt to rafters. *Satisfactory*'s first-person perspective imbues the game with a sense of place, and it has movement and physics that would feel right at home in a first-person shooter. There's a slick feeling to running and jumping around a factory floor, sliding under conveyor belts or leaping over the heads of enemies out in the world to swat them in the head with your energy sword.

It all adds up to a game that just feels fun and natural to hang out in, which in turn encourages booting up *Satisfactory* and idling around even if you aren't in the mood to lay down 24 constructors to spit out 960 screws per minute. When you need a break from it all but don't want to stop playing, the Factory Cart is there waiting. Wee-woo. ■



LEFT: The Factory Cart does not encourage great posture.

RIGHT: FICSIT's standard-issue headlamp keeps the cart drivable at night.





CALL OF DUTY 2

How Call of Duty felt before Modern Warfare. *By Kyle Hoekstra*

It's 2005 and I'm strapped into the back of a truck, driving once more into a North African town in the level The End of the Beginning in the demo for *Call of Duty 2*. Ahead, El Daba is masked by desert haze and a grave instrumental underscores the nervous energy of boys from the 7th Armoured Division. Suddenly fighter planes are swooping above, the tank ahead explodes along with the Tommies who were riding it, and your driver swerves to avoid the wreckage as it chugs smoke over the landscape.

This is the kind of non-interactive, bombastic spectacle which would define the series – not always to its credit. But here, as I replayed the demo yet again, I was impressed. When you leap from the truck

you're plunged into a street fight. You push through alleys, which seemed more labyrinthine than they really were, and eliminate artillery crews before signalling the Allied fleet to bombard the docks.

Drama is injected at every opportunity: on the way to grab some final intel, a Tommy busts through a door only to be torn apart by a machine gun. Sometimes the drama isn't scripted: I step onto a backstreet, where I witness an enemy beaten down by an ally who I'm convinced would burn with fury even if it wasn't programmed, and suddenly my role as player feels important only as part of a greater war effort.

I was used to the absurdity of arena shooters. By contrast, *Call of Duty 2* offered immersive, straight-faced spectacle, leaving out pickups and health packs for narrative set-pieces which eclipsed its

TOP: Captain Price in World War II, before he was reimagined for *Modern Warfare*.

predecessors. Infinity Ward's status was cemented among shooter devs on PC, and as a console exclusive on Xbox 360 it also helped reinforce its shooter credentials.

When *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* swept the board with its inventive campaign and multiplayer, *Call of Duty 2*'s sincerity instantly looked a bit old hat. By this time Activision's multi-developer, multiplatform CoD machine was steaming ahead. Yet while many of its franchise kin proved forgettable, *Call of Duty 2* remains every bit the thrill-ride that Infinity Ward promised it would be.

MOMENTS OF CINEMA

When I finally installed the game from its fresh DVD-ROM, it turned out my war would begin in Moscow. It starts like every World War II game from those days: basic training, albeit this time with potatoes instead of grenades. Thereafter the Stalingrad campaign unfolds with missions

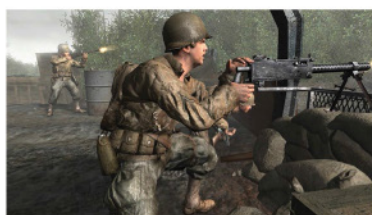
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2005

DEVELOPER
Infinity Ward

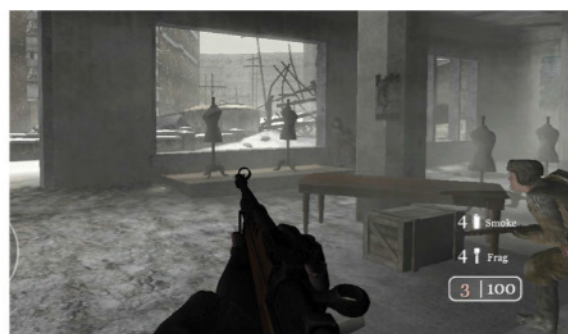
PUBLISHER
Activision

LINK
callofduty.com



ABOVE: The reloading animations are a nice way to show off the devs' handiwork.

RIGHT: The game gave the impression of a squad shooter, even when you know it isn't.



kicking off with moments of cinema. On your way to reinforce embattled Russian comrades, you navigate darkened corridors while echoing megaphones demand your surrender. You hunker down in a trench as tanks rumble overhead. As you attempt to crawl surreptitiously through a pipe into a train yard, gunfire bores rays of light through the metal.

The singleplayer is divided into three campaigns, the other two following British Desert Rats in North Africa and France and

American Rangers in Western Europe. Some levels are conventionally tight and scripted, others expansive and less controlled. But above all *Call of Duty 2* sold drama. By the time you're enacting a close-quarters raid on a fuel depot as Sergeant John Davies in Egypt, you've already hunted panzers in Stalingrad as Private Vasili Koslov and feverishly repulsed waves of Wehrmacht from its City Hall by sniping across a square.

IN A TENSE ESCAPE MISSION YOU TAKE THE GUNNER'S SEAT IN AN ARMoured CAR

As the Brits in Africa, you defend a town by spotting far-away targets for artillery with binoculars and plod beside a tank and clear out bunkers. In a tense escape mission you take the gunner's seat in a commandeered armoured car as Captain Price and Private McGregor bicker while wheeling past half-tracks and anti-tank troops.

UNEXPECTED TURN

In an unexpected turn, you're given the command of a tank in an engaging vehicular puzzle which works surprisingly well to mix up the pace. It begins with a Star Wars-like reporting-in ("Zebra One ready!"), then dives into a tank rush with a real sense of momentum. You hunt your quarry across sand dunes beneath a golden horizon, where tanks erupt in delightful plumes.

But the most memorable set piece in *Call of Duty 2* is the D-Day mission. There's not a moment of silence in this intense retread of an

CALL TIME

Infinity Ward's CoDs in the 2000s



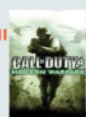
CALL OF DUTY 2003

The minds behind *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* released their debut to great acclaim, racking up 80 Game of the Year awards.



CALL OF DUTY 2 2005

Infinity Ward's sequels continued to push the envelope for immersive World War II games, before they left the period for good.



CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE 2007

Set in the present day, the series' destiny changed instantly with *Modern Warfare's* massive success.



CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 2 2009

The worthy sequel to *Modern Warfare* was the last before two studio leads left to form Respawn Entertainment.



FAR LEFT: With *Call of Duty 2* Infinity Ward gave the best version of Saving Private Ryan: the game.

ABOVE: Disappointingly, it does not flush.

event explored by a proto-Infinity Ward in *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*. Soldiers perish under gunfire and topple from rope ladders beneath the sheer cliffs of Pointe du Hoc.

At the top, trenches lead to an orchard with artillery to be sabotaged. The sound is carnage. Thompsons and BARs rattle against the hum of an MG. The staccato pops of rifles and 'zing' of ejected Garand clips intermingle with American and German yelling. Bombs whistle and crash, walls light up with gunfire and wisps of

smoke attend bullet holes. The war-torn landscape may look distinctly polygonal nowadays, but it never feels less than exciting.

Once the artillery's dealt with, the level is played in reverse as you refight across the orchard to clear the bunkers. Ultimately, the mood switches to one of desperation, with you clinging onto the Pointe until air support can save the day. The sense of release when they do is heightened immeasurably by playing on Veteran difficulty – a thoroughly punishing grind. This is *Call of Duty 2* at its peak.

WAR VETERAN

The most challenging missions on Veteran



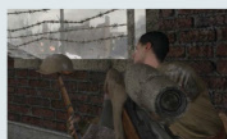
THE SILO

Even after you've tortuously cleared each of the marked houses in this bucolic village, you're charged with sniping mortar teams from above a silo before they get you first.



BATTLE FOR HILL 400

A gruelling uphill fight transitions into a defence of a bunker on top of a hill, where you have to take cover from artillery, snipe baddies and hold out for help.



COMRADE SNIPER

Staying behind cover to pick off waves of enemies is tricky when your comrades have a laissez-faire approach to covering your back. Make those bullets count.

HEAD-POPPING

There were World War II games before this, but had they ever felt so electrifying? Its weapons sounded punchy and realistic. They came with smooth reloading animations which showed off accurate models and reinforced the sense that you were embodying someone super-competent, a fantasy (let's be honest) elaborated with each sequel with greater fidelity.

Lots of the game is seen through iron-sights and it can feel like an exercise in head-popping, but no less than its sequels. Targets are squishy, and unloading a Thompson makes you feel like a gangster. Unlike its sequels you can't throw back grenades and you can't sprint. But it did introduce smoke grenades, which spread effectively and confuse enemies so you can move unseen to the next slab of waist-high cover.

Unlike the original, *Call of Duty 2*'s levels fan out into more open spaces. This required rebuilding the AI, so enemy troops could respond to player attempts on the objective from various angles.

BAND OF BROTHERS

Two valiant comrades clamber on a Panzer and lob a grenade through its



The memorable demo mission kicks off with a bumpy ride into town.

top hatch. They leap off, but kind of can't, and then soar off into the snow as they explode with the tank. Nobody's going to claim these guys are sentient, but in other moments *Call of Duty 2*'s soldiers helped make you feel like part of a squad.

Despite their routine death by silliness, these voiced squad mates are memorable. That squad feeling is mainly accomplished with a "battle chatter" system which bestows a rough situational awareness to its AI.

It isn't a squad tactics game, but you want to believe it is when you hear allies attempting to cut through the confusion of battle and coordinate your attention. They'll point out targets with precise coordinates including, "Fascists! Behind the low wall, over to the south!" and, "Krauts! By the sandbags!" as well as the 20,000 other lines of dialogue of that flavour which were recorded.

Ramping the difficulty up to Veteran sharply exposes the foibles of the AI. Enemies' gunfire is dead-on and their massed grenades are extremely annoying. They're idiots to code: in practice it is difficult to get the drop on them. Like multiple Agents Smith they'll swivel as one and fire with unerring accuracy.

YOU NEVER FEEL LIKE YOU'RE FIGHTING ALONE LIKE YOU DO IN, SAY, HALO

It is cheering when comrades rush forwards autonomously, dropping foes and yelling military garble. But when they stop advancing, because you have not tripped an invisible logic switch which will force them onwards, missions can grind to a halt. As a result a lot of Veteran is spent trying to usher allies onwards where they'll face enemies so you don't have to. All the same, you never feel like you're fighting alone like you do in, say, *Halo*. The texture standards of the time even let me imagine that Sgt Randall's cuboid head disguised the face of Tom Hanks' Captain Miller.

CURTAIN CALL

The blurb on the back of the box promises "more cinematic intensity and chaos than ever before". On this note, 2024's *Call of Duty: Black Ops 6* has the edge, its singleplayer unfurling a breathless, genre-blending rollercoaster. But beside it, *Call of Duty 2* isn't embarrassed.



It may be slower, and not just because you can't sprint. It's a little more composed and sober, yet still exhibits the set-pieces that came to be the series' trademark. It shores up some gravitas from its use of Military Channel footage, photo slides to foreground missions, and the inclusion of journal entries from its otherwise inscrutable protagonists. This gives it the feeling of a history piece. Meanwhile the self-serious score by Graeme Revell and the stately quotes from generals which appear when you die give it a solemn atmosphere.

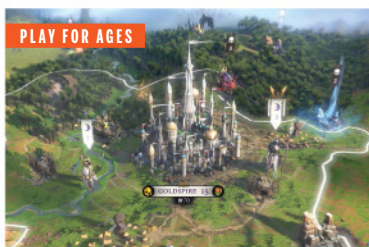
On the other hand there's something about its clarity of visuals which make it enjoyable to return to. The magnificent TV series *Band of Brothers* convinced Epic to desaturate the look of 2006's *Gears of War* and a host of games followed suit, including 2008's *Call of Duty: World at War*. But *Call of Duty 2* still aims to please with its blue skies and golden sandstone towns and lush Normandy bocage.

Altogether, *Call of Duty 2* survived as more than just an artefact. Battling with the game even on the highest difficulty until the relief of "Checkpoint Reached" remains a thrill ride. ■

FRASER BROWN



As the nights are long and the weather bleak, I find myself gravitating towards irresponsibly vast games to keep me safely indoors. Away from the cold and the strange creatures lurking in the darkness.



PLAY FOR AGES

AGE OF WONDERS 4

paradoxinteractive.com

→ Conquer the world with your civilisation of undead cannibal rats or become a powerful dragon ruling over an industrious race of religious lizards. *Age of Wonders 4* is a 4X just as interested in the weird societies you construct as it is with letting you smash armies together.



CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT

CRUSADER KINGS 3

paradoxinteractive.com

→ I'm always banging on about CK3, but I won't stop. The last expansion introduced the wandering noble system, letting you hang around in a camp, taking on missions, robbing poshos and getting up to all sorts of scrapes, turning it into an even better grand strategy RPG hybrid.

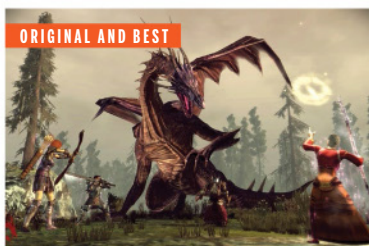


CAPE TOWN

DC UNIVERSE ONLINE

dcuniverseonline.com/home

→ After more than a decade away, I just returned to *DCUO* to find the superhero MMO well supported and fairly busy, and despite feeling a bit long in the tooth I'm having a blast doing crimes in Gotham and Metropolis again. Not bad on the Steam Deck, either, which is a plus.



ORIGINAL AND BEST

DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

ea.com/games/dragon-age/dragon-age-origins

→ BioWare's attempt to modernise CRPGs gave us one of the greatest fantasy RPGs ever made, and the studio hasn't been able to outdo itself since. It's a gloomy adventure, but one you get to experience with a cast of weirdos and a combat system that's still one of the best around.

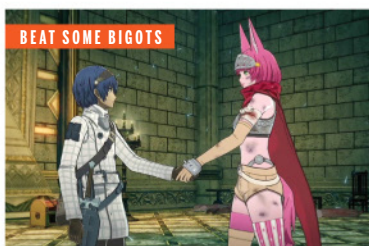


BLIGHTED BLIGHTY

FALLOUT: LONDON

fallout4london.com

→ So much more than just a mod, *Fallout: London* is a vast RPG that transposes *Fallout 4* to the English capital, and it's spot on. The best way to experience London, frankly, and only a tiny bit more toxic than usual. It's the best *Fallout* game since *New Vegas*, to boot.



BEAT SOME BIGOTS

METAPHOR: REFANTAZIO

metaphor.atlus.com

→ Atlus' latest meaty JRPG features a menagerie of horrible monsters, but your greatest foe, the thing you're fighting for your life to destroy, is institutional racism with a side of fundamentalism. It's heavy, but you get to hang out with an adorable bat who's also a disgraced knight.

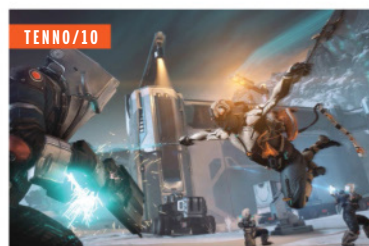


SPACE RACE

SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE 2

sinsofasolarempire2.com

→ A more conquest-heavy 4X, *Sins 2* flings you into an interstellar conflict where you'll need to manage an empire and a huge fleet in real-time, all while the solar system changes around you, opening up new paths and closing existing ones as planets and moons dance around the sun.



TENNO/10

WARFRAME

warframe.com

→ With the strange 1999 update looming (featuring a mutated boyband), I've been on a big *Warframe* kick lately. It's still wonderful and still weird. I love it. The acrobatics, the peculiar abilities, the impossible-to-follow story – I'm hooked all over again.



Future Publishing Ltd Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA | Tel: 01225 442244 | Email: letters@pcgamer.com | www.pcgamer.com

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CONTRIBUTORS

Matt Elliott, Phil Iwaniuk, Tom Sykes, Ian Evenden, James Nouch, Justin Wagner, Shaun Prescott, Marco Zangirolami, Jon Bolding, Matt Killeen, Rick Lane, Lincoln Carpenter, Dominic Tarason, Matt Poskitt, Len Hafer, Kerry Brunskill, Emily Price, Daniella Lucas

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Digital Producer	Sebastian Hue

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Spy Illustrations	David Lyttleton

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ISSN: 1351-3540

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IT'S ALL OVER...



THE PCG INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: **THE BIG SLI**

PART 2

Vivienne Rutledge was Queen Consort in MMO *Fantasy Crown*, meaning she was a major player on the game's royal council, second only to the King of Starensia, Alendrake, as played by fellow *Fantasy Crown* player Eddie Mars. "Why would I kill that chump, Rusty?" Vivienne snapped when I questioned her. "He was a nobody and, worse, a console gamer nobody. I resent having to crossplay with these people, but what can you do? If it was up to me, I'd have *Fantasy Crown*'s royal council restricted to gaming's true aristocracy, the PC Gaming Master Race. Anyway, it clearly wasn't me you fool, as Eddie can confirm. Yes I found Rusty, but I was with Eddie all evening, so couldn't have done it."

Eddie, when grilled, confirmed he'd been in the tavern drinking until Rusty's body was found by Vivienne, who'd stepped out for a smoke. "Viv wasn't happy one jot when Rusty got voted onto the royal council, but she was with me all night up to stepping out and, well, have you seen her? Rusty was found dumped in that barrel, and Viv is so slight she couldn't lift him, no way. You should be questioning Stanley Hawks or Brody Chandler not Viv!" Eddie was right, Vivienne must have weighed in at 120lbs at a push. Eddie was given an alibi by Vivienne, leading me next to the head of the King's Guard, Deckard, played by Stanley.

Stanley hadn't been in the tavern all night, confirming to me he had been playing *Fantasy Crown* in the LAN area of the convention hall. "What creeped me out most, man, was, like, just moments before I heard Vivienne's scream from behind the tavern, I saw Rusty's character, Profion, going into Starensia's auction house in the game. I didn't think much of it at the time, but then after Rusty was found, it suddenly struck me. If Rusty was dead, why did I see Profion in *Fantasy Crown*?" Stanley confirmed that he was the only one in the LAN area of the convention hall.

Could Stanley have done Rusty in? It was entirely possible, as he had no alibi. He wasn't a good specimen of physical fitness, but there was no doubting he would have had the strength to do the deed and dump Rusty in the barrel. That story about seeing Rusty's character active in *Fantasy Crown*, seemingly after he'd already been forcibly ejected from this mortal coil, could be nothing other than classic misdirection after all. What worried me, though, was that my gut told me Stanley was speaking truth. And that pointed towards a more sinister conclusion to this case.

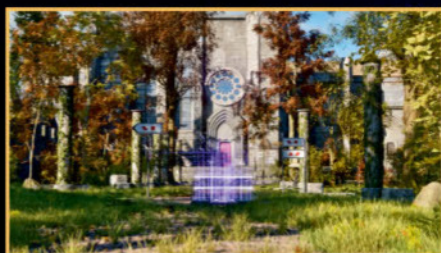
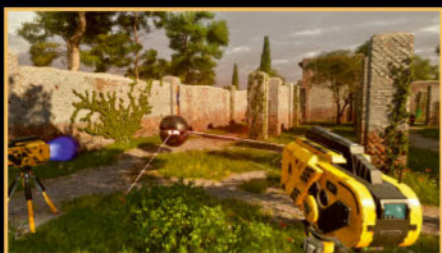
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